VIDEOGAME CULTURE

CHRISTMAS 2004



NINTENDO | SONY | MICROSOFT | PC | PORTABLE | COIN-OP | SET-TOP | ONL

Judgement Day

Reviewed: the most important games of 2004

MERCURY RISES ON PSP

ARCHER MACLEAN UNVEILS A SONY HANDHELD TITLE RUNNING AT FULL TILT

THE MAKING OF GAUNTLET

FEATURING NEVER-BEFORE-SEEN ART FROM ATARI'S LEGENDARY COIN-OP

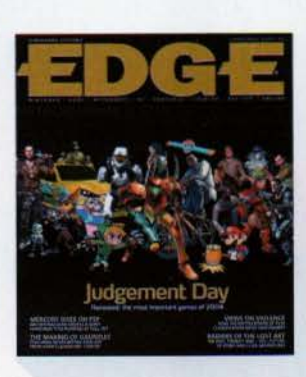
VIEWS ON VIOLEN

HOW THE BRITISH BOARD OF F CLASSIFICATION RATES VIDEOGA

RAIDERS OF THE LOST A

THE PAST, PRESENT AND – YES – FUT OF POINT-AND-CLICK ADVENTU


Winter 2004



Is 2004 the best year ever for videogames? It should be. The capacity of this generation of gaming technology has been explored and utilised (doesn't talk of just how difficult it is to make effective use of PS2's fiddly vector units seem from another era?), all of the key genres have reached maturation – some might say saturation – point, and more money is being spent on building titles, from funding larger teams to buying in real-world soundtracks, than ever before. But do the blockbusters we're seeing now, released together in a clump running up to Christmas just as Hollywood's event movies are launched as a wave in the summer, realise all of their ambitions? That question is answered this month in Review, beginning on page 73.

But what do 2004's biggest releases tell us about how gaming exists as a pastime today? Well, first, with *Halo 2* (see p74) and its supremely comprehensive multiplayer support, we're seeing the 'gaming as sport' motif take a genuinely evolutionary step. With *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (p78) we're seeing player empowerment given more precedence than ever before. And with *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes* (p76)… well, with *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes* we're seeing that Nintendo still hasn't finished *Mario 128*. These issues are fundamental to how the videogame form will develop.

There are other important games this month. The stories behind *Prince Of Persia: Warrior Within* (p80) and *Killzone* (p84), varied though they are, have built up a special kind of expectation: Ubisoft is seeking to prove that the first title was no fluke and Guerrilla is attempting to come good on the promises that once earned its game an **Edge** cover. Meanwhile, *Mawaru: Made In Wario* (p90) reveals a new kind of handheld interactivity before Nintendo's DS even arrives, as *The Bard's Tale* (p93) demonstrates that, despite how it might so often seem, videogame humour really isn't stuck in a rut of smut and innuendo, and *Pathway To Glory* (p94) finally maps out a massively multiplayer landscape for Nokia's N-Gage.

Elsewhere this month you'll see the return of The Making Of…, which focuses on *Gauntlet*, a coin-op from a time when we wondered just how much better gaming could get. In our imaginations, many of us saw the adventures of Master Chief, Samus Aran and Carl Johnson, but today they're real, here, now. And, yes, making 2004 probably the best time ever to be sitting around playing videogames.



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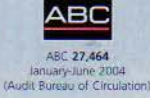
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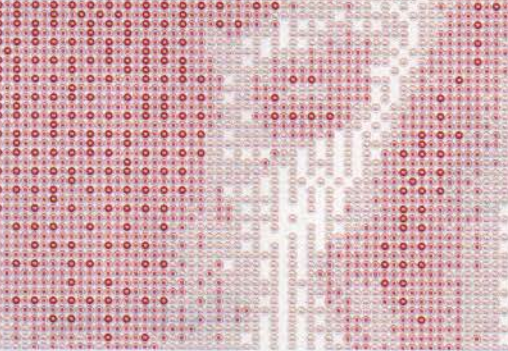


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CONTENTS

CHRISTMAS

This month



Every month



CONTENTS

CONTINUED

Hype

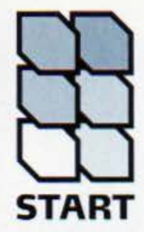
Review



START













24 tracks will feature in *Ridge Racers*, including favourites from *R4*, *RRV* and *Rage Racer*; also returning is race queen Reiko Nagase. The car line-up seems all-new, as is the introduction of a nitro boost

After some doubt, the PSP *Sangoku Musou* title has been confirmed for launch day. Both Sony and Koei will be hoping for the bite-sized edition to continue the PS2 version's sales streak

PSP™







Snake returns to handheld fashionably late, with a December 16 release – Konami's only launch day title is one of the fistful of PSP mahjongg games, the less-exciting-than-it-sounds *Mahjongg Fight Club*



HARDWARE

PSP launch and pricing announced

Sony finally drops its portable bombshell





While Nintendo basked in a successful introduction of its DS to the Japanese industry (see **E**143), Sony was left in an uncomfortable standoff with dealers, editors and developers concerned by the lack of concrete PSP information. Further insult to injury came with the Nikkei Consulting Bureau's release of the current level of year-end console pre-orders, showing the Game Boy Advance in the lead, followed by the PS2, then the DS leading the slimline PS2.

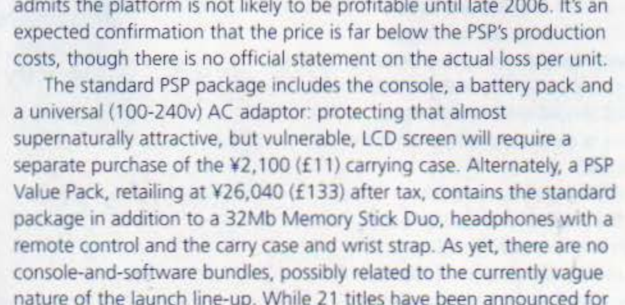
The week after Nintendo's DS conference saw a curt press release war between the two companies, with Sony proclaiming that the PSP price and release date would be made official one month before its launch. Nintendo countered with the far more tangible announcement that 300,000 DS units would make the initial Japanese market launch, with around a million to be released by the end of December (the same numbers seem to apply for its American release). Sony's response was to finally announce the launch date and price for its system: December 12, and ¥19,800 (£100) – or a more believable ¥20,790 (£105) after tax.

Sony seems to be continuing to push the PSP's technical quality as a counter to the DS' quantity: the limited launch numbers are also likely to find demand outstripping supply

An aggressive price point far lower than anyone had expected – many insiders predicting the unit would be priced upwards of ¥30,000 (£150) – the announcement, as intended, made waves throughout the industry. Though still expensive, the PSP is now positioned to be considerably more affordable: a move that will also do much to allay the fears of developers yet to commit to the platform. With only 200,000 units to be released to the Japanese market at launch, rising to a predicted 500,000 by the year's end, Sony seems to be continuing to push the PSP's technical quality as a counter to the DS' quantity: the limited launch numbers are also likely to find demand outstripping supply, as with the PS2's introduction.



Sony still expects to release the system in western markets by Spring 2005, and believes the PSP will be popular among western users by virtue of its stylish appearance, an assumption both Sony's fans and critics will agree has proven true with its hardware in the past. The company's hope is for worldwide PSP sales to pass one million units shortly after the American and European launches, but admits the platform is not likely to be profitable until late 2006. It's an expected confirmation that the price is far below the PSP's production costs, though there is no official statement on the actual loss per unit.



The standard PSP package includes the console, a battery pack and a universal (100-240v) AC adaptor: protecting that almost supernaturally attractive, but vulnerable, LCD screen will require a separate purchase of the ¥2,100 (£11) carrying case. Alternately, a PSP Value Pack, retailing at ¥26,040 (£133) after tax, contains the standard package in addition to a 32Mb Memory Stick Duo, headphones with a remote control and the carry case and wrist strap. As yet, there are no console-and-software bundles, possibly related to the currently vague nature of the launch line-up. While 21 titles have been announced for December, many are still lacking definitive dates.

Accessory prices

Because there's more to PSP than just the console

- **Secondary battery: ¥5,040 (£25)**
- **Secondary AC Adaptor: ¥3,675 (£19)**
- **Memory Stick Duo (32Mb): ¥2,940 (£15)**
- **Headphones + remote control: ¥2,940 (£15)**
- **Carrying case + wrist strap: ¥2,100 (£11)**

Game releases

The 21 'launch window' titles, with dates where announced

- **AI Series Go** (Marvelous Interactive, TBC)
- **AI Series Mahjongg** (Marvelous Interactive, TBC)
- **AI Series Shogi** (Marvelous Interactive, TBC)
- **Armored Core Formula Front** (From Software, Dec 12)
- **Dokodemo Issyo** (SCEJ, Dec 16)
- **Gagharv Trilogy** (Bandai, TBC)
- **Kollon** (Cyber Front, TBC)
- **Lumines** (Bandai, TBC)
- **Mahjongg Taikai** (Koei, TBC)
- **Mahjongg Fight Club** (Konami Dec 12)
- **Metal Gear Acid** (Konami, Dec 16)
- **Minna No Golf Portable** (SCEJ, Dec 12)
- **Mojipittan** (Namco Dec 16)
- **Need For Speed Underground Rivals** (EA, TBC)
- **Puyo Puyo Fever** (Sega, Dec 24)
- **Puzzle Bobble Pocket** (Taito, TBC)
- **Rengoku: The Tower of Purgatory** (Hudson, Dec 12)
- **Ridge Racers** (Namco, Dec 12)
- **Shin Sangoku Musou** (Koei, Dec 12)
- **Tiger Woods PGA Tour** (EA, TBC)
- **Vampire Chronicle: The Chaos Tower** (Capcom, Dec 12)

Those confirmed for launch day include *Minna No Golf Portable* and *Ridge Racers* – the latter obviously much further in development than the prototype shown at TGS, and likely to take pride of place in the initial line-up. PSP titles are to cost on average ¥5,040 (£25), with puzzle games likely to retail at a slightly lower price.

Sony has also revealed two notable RPG houses are developing for the system: *Dark Cloud* and *Dragon Quest VIII* creator Level 5 is preparing an original PSP RPG, although no release date has been set, and Square Enix will provide another *Final Fantasy VII* spin-off – though one unique in being billed as an actual RPG – *Crisis Core*, due in 2006.

If the question of the PSP's pricing has been resolved, the issue of its battery life looks to dog Sony well into launch, with the official line of 4-6 hours for gameplay and 4-5 hours for movie playback dependent on minimal screen brightness, volume and wireless activity. According to Ken Kutaragi, battery life will vary from title to title, with a puzzle game obviously less intensive than *Ridge Racers*. Noting that the original Walkman's battery life was a mere two hours, Kutaragi indicated that Sony would continue to work on reducing the machine's power consumption – but this may come as little consolation to owners of the first-generation machine if the quoted figures prove overly optimistic.

EVENT

Games go supersize

It's the end of the year but, thanks to the likes of GTA: San Andreas and Halo 2, it's also the start of what are predicted to be the most lucrative months in the history of the videogames industry



GTA:SA and *Halo 2*'s success could see more retailers, and consumers, succumb to launch day fervour in future: that *Turok 2* camper was ahead of his time

There was little fanfare – no dancing girls or Uzi-totting Bloods – but at midnight on Friday October 29 hundreds of retailers opened their doors to let in the *Grand Theft Auto* faithful. At Game's main London store in Oxford Street, the queue stretched through the shop, round the corner and out into the road; the waiting time from the back an estimated 40 minutes. By noon the following day, all 1,000 copies had gone. No copies were available in central London and it was a similar story throughout the UK as *GTA: San Andreas* went on to sell over 650,000 copies during its first week; two and half times as much as the UK's previous fastest selling game, *GTA: Vice City*. Global first week sales were estimated to be over three million units, generating around £95 million in retail revenues. And with analysts predicting total sales in the region of 15 million units, the GTA series is now well on the way to becoming one of the top five game series of all time, alongside *Pokémon*, *Gran Turismo*, *Madden NFL* and *Tetris*.

Nine days later, much the same thing happened as Microsoft started its 27-country-strong party in support of the release of *Halo 2*. Launched in the US, on the back of 1.5 million pre-orders, over 7,000 stores held appropriately-named Midnight Madness events with the usual array of queues, razzmatazz and Master Chief-costumed fans. "Day-one sales of *Halo 2* herald the biggest 24 hours in entertainment retail history," said **Peter Moore**, Xbox's corporate vice president of publishing and marketing. "By the end of this week, the world will be playing *Halo 2* and fans will band together across the globe to fend off the Covenant."

But impressive as such singular events are, they're only part of what some see as a bigger opportunity. As **Gary Cooper**, an analyst at Banc Of America Securities, put it: "The reality is the second half of 2004 should witness the largest sales of videogames in any six-month period in the history of the industry."

On one level, this is purely down to the inexorable rise of the number of consumers with consoles. There are now around 74 million PlayStation2s, 18 million Xboxes and 12 million GameCubes in the world's living rooms, with price cuts and redesign strategies continuing to



With *GTA:SA* boasting subplots, secrets and statistics to rival any JRPG, the hefty strategy guide can be positioned as an essential compliment to the game sale



boost numbers. This is only part of the picture though. What's also happened is publishers have got to grips with this generation of gamers. After three years of hard work, focus groups, failures and luck, the publishers know exactly what sort of games the market wants and that's what they're going to provide. Hence the much marketed and anticipated sequels to previously multi-million sellers such as *Halo*, *Half-Life*, *Metroid Prime*, *Need For Speed Underground* and *The Getaway*. Bigger and in some cases better, it's certainly spoiling gamers for choice§. Retailers are licking their lips too. In the US, for example, two of the leading specialist stores, Electronics Boutique and GameStop, saw their share prices rise to a two-year

Publishers have got to grips with this generation of gamers After three years of hard work, focus groups, failures and luck, the publishers know exactly what sort of games the market wants

high on the back of expected boost from *GTA:SA* and *Halo 2*. One well-known analyst, Anthony Gikas, predicted US software sales would rise around ten percent during the December quarter, with overall sales for 2004 topping $7.2 billion.

For many publishers, however, there is a fear the biggest games will take a disproportionate amount of the available cash. "It's always a concern

San Andreas in effect, from the unmissable (above) to the unfortunate (right). Both *GTA:SA* and *Halo 2* enjoyed collosally successful launch sales, but it's the oncoming Christmas period where they can best sell their respective hardware

when so many games are being released together that the biggest will cannibalise sales," says **David Wilson**, Sony UK's head of press. It's a particular issue for Sony, which in a sense is going head-to-head against the PS2-only driving-and-shooting *GTA:SA* with the release of its own PS2-only driving-and-shooting *The Getaway: Black Monday*, sequel to the three-million selling *The Getaway*.

"We have to be rational and accept some of our audience won't buy the game immediately because they're going to be playing *GTA*," Wilson ponders. "But that doesn't mean they won't buy it ever. We'll be looking to make sure we have good post-Christmas sales, for example." He also thinks similar styles of games can generate complimentary sales. "It's the same as when there are clusters of fast food restaurants in the same street."

That said, plenty of games seem likely to struggle, particularly Xbox-bound shooters such as Vivendi's *Tron 2.0 Killer App* and Ubisoft's *Ghost Recon 2*, as well as games with Xbox versions such as Activision's *Call Of Duty* and EA's *GoldenEye: Rogue Agent*. Indeed, the publisher that's done the most to limit its exposure to what Cooper somewhat dramatically labels "murderer's row" is Electronic Arts.

"In 2003, we had a very strong Christmas; taking around 35 per cent of the UK market. This year we've spread out our games much more evenly," explains EA Europe's head of corporate communications, **Glen O'Connell**. For example, *Fifa 2005* was released earlier in the year than its predecessor. Likewise, the decision to give *The Sims 2* some space with a September launch has paid off as well, with the game selling over a million units in ten days – EA's fastest selling PC game ever. It has since gone on to top 2.5m units.

Another neat move has been the positioning of *Burnout 3* with respect to *Need For Speed Underground 2*. "We've purposefully kept them apart," O'Connell explains. Released in September, *Burnout 3* has sold over 1.5 million copies. Whether *Need For Speed Underground 2* can match the seven million sales total of its predecessor is another matter, but Sony's decision to push *Gran Turismo 4* back into 2005 will certainly help.

And with other big hitters such as *Battlefield 2* and *Metal Gear Solid 3* (in Europe) also due in the traditionally quiet months of the new year, it may be that the good times will continue to roll well into 2005.

Newswire



Spector leaves Ion Storm

Warren Spector (above) has ended weeks of speculation by officially announcing his departure from Ion Storm. Having started out at Origin Systems, Spector made his name on the *System Shock*, *Thief* and *Deus Ex* games. Rumours have long been circulating that Ion Storm's creative staff have been frustrated by the direction Eidos wanted its games to take. Earlier this year, Harvey and Randy Smith, key creative forces in the *Thief* series, walked out of development on *The Third Age*. However, Eidos has confirmed that Spector will still be involved with its projects as an IP consultant. There are also suggestions that he may move to Midway's Inevitable Studios, currently at work on *Area 51*, which has already attracted other team members away from neighbouring Ion Storm.

EA spouse speaks out

Crunch time has long been accepted as a necessary evil of the games industry, but many are being forced to question that status quo by the webjournal of a self-described 'disgruntled spouse' of an Electronic Arts employee. Her entry details the company's mandatory crunch time policy – which, at its most extreme, requires an 85-hour working week. Picked up by several high-traffic link sites it has built a swell of support from developers, including current and ex-EA staff – even to the extent of other studios inviting EA staff to come and work with them in a less intensive environment. It's a potentially hugely damaging indictment of both EA and the industry: you can read it for yourself at www.livejournal.com/users/ea_spouse



It was the DS' show, but the GBA and Cube were also represented, with a much improved *StarFox Assault* one of the non-DS highlights. Another was a (female) cosplay Link (above)

EVENT

Touch! DS tour

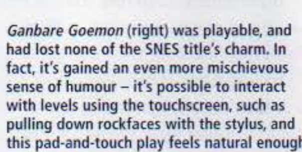
Nintendo reaches out and gets touched at Osaka Technoport

Nintendo's travelling DS roadshow wasn't strictly created to illustrate the distinction between the DS and the PSP, but it's impossible not to compare the mood of the Touch! DS Osaka stop with Sony's PSP promotional still life (see page 8). It wasn't so much the DS hardware or software that was on show, but the audience's reaction to it, as they queued to milk cows on *Harvest Moon*, blow into the microphone with *XX/XY Feel The Magic*, or play *Mario 64* for the first time again, linked up and laughing.

Many attendees came as complete families but there was just as large a presence of trend-following teenagers and contemplative middle-aged salarymen, all prepared to stand for 30 minutes in line for demo pods. *Pictochat* drew droves: both to play and to simply sit and watch the stage presentation, where comperes in oversized bow-ties held a Nintendo quiz for the fastest to draw and send a correct answer. Later, DS units were smuggled into the packed seating area to allow the pod-users to wirelessly communicate with strangers, the resulting correspondences broadcast on the big screen to the delight of all.

Throughout the show, no member of the audience was safe from participation: wandering groups of event staff wearing enormous speakers were demonstrating *Jam With The Band* in impromptu sessions. While our alto sax on Smoke On The Water got off to a bad start, much to our bandmates' amusement, they were cheering us on by our considerably improved final solo. An aspect highlighted by the thrust-in-our-hands nature of the experience was the impressive durability of the DS screens, unscathed by literally hundreds of fingers and styli.

If the DS industry showings were the theory, Touch! DS was the practice, answering the initial scepticism over the communication element with the assurance of a company that absolutely understands its core market. It's an approach as intuitive as the best of the DS' stylus-driven games: get the attention of the fingers, eyes, ears and mouth, and hearts and minds will follow.



No member of the audience was safe from participation: wandering groups of event staff wearing speakers were demonstrating Jam With The Band in impromptu sessions

Firstparty titles like *Yoshi's Touch & Go* are intuitive enough to make instructions redundant; but Namco's *Pac-Pix* confused some









Ganbare Goemon (right) was playable, and had lost none of the SNES title's charm. In fact, it's gained an even more mischievous sense of humour – it's possible to interact with levels using the touchscreen, such as pulling down rockfaces with the stylus, and this pad-and-touch play feels natural enough

Newswire



Where's Willy? Here's Willy

Following Edge's tireless campaigning (read: we ran a story here last month), the mobile version of *Jet Set Willy* has been released from development hell and should be available from exclusive distributor Advanced Mobile Solutions now. The conversion, undertaken by handheld specialist www.numfum.com, is compatible with new 3G phones including the SE V800, 902SH, E1000, V980 and 6630, and follows the exacting platforming format of the revered Matthew Smith original from 1984. Whether the completeness of the port means that the attic bug has been retained remains unknown at the time of going to press.





A week-long event in Nottingham, the Game Making School is just one demonstration of the growing recognition of the role games can play in children's education

Sumo Digital's Sean Davies takes time out from *OutRun 2* duties to provide advice to the next generation of developers

EDUCATION

Institute honours gaming benefits

Games, and especially game creation tools, are spearheading a drive to develop new methods of learning

After a year characterised by more than the usual array of horror stories, finally there's some good news on the effect of games on children. Highlighted by two projects at the Centre For The Study Of Children, Youth And Media, part of London University's Institute Of Education, and part funded by the Department Of Trade And Industry, researchers revealed details of their work, which emphasises the potential educational benefits of games.

Caroline Pelletier, manager of Making Games, a project developing games authoring software for educational uses, explains that the subject is now being taken much more seriously within the teaching profession: "Games are being studied as important and legitimate cultural phenomena. There is an academic journal and A-level media studies includes a games option," she says. "There's also a growing recognition that games play an important part in young people's lives and therefore warrant critical attention."

The project, which is being undertaken with Oxford developer Immersive Education, is to create a prototype 3D game-authoring tool to allow children to design their own roleplaying and action adventure games. "Over the next two years, we'll release successive prototypes, which educators can take into schools and summer camps," says Pelletier. "We'll also use it to investigate how game making can be taught, and whether the concept of literacy can be extended to the analysis and production of games."

A similar project in Nottingham provides more evidence of the increasing acceptance of the positive effects of games. It's part of the PhD of **Jake Habgood**, a one-time programmer at Gremlin and Infogrames who is now studying at the Learning Sciences Research Institute.

"I'm interested in the way educational content is integrated within the gameplay of a game and how this affects learning," Habgood says. "Traditional edutainment products generally have a loose relationship between subject matter and gameplay. I hope to be able to show whether a closer integration between learning content and game mechanics helps or hinders children's understanding."

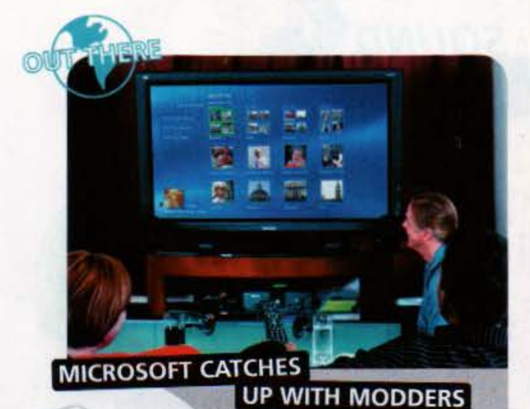
One element of this is the creation of resources such as game making tools and art and audio assets to enable students to make their own games. "I think many teachers feel this kind of activity is beyond their technical abilities, but there are a number of packages out there that make it easy to create games. My website (www.gamelearning.net) attempts to remove some of these obstacles by providing evaluations of different packages as well as free game-making lesson plans and resources," Habgood offers.

"Games are being studied as important and legitimate cultural phenomena. There is an academic journal and A-level media studies includes a games option"

And during the recent school half-term, he put these to good use in Game Making School, a week-long opportunity funded by the Entertainment Software Charity for around 20 12- and 13-year-olds to learn the basics of creating games.

"It's great to be able to give people some insight into how the games industry really operates," enthuses one of the professional developers Habgood roped into providing expert advice, **Sean Davies**, lead programmer at Sumo Digital, the firm that converted *OutRun 2* to the Xbox. "Jake's work also seems to point out something which I've long suspected about computer games – namely that making them is at least as much fun as playing them – and tends to offer more potential for learning."

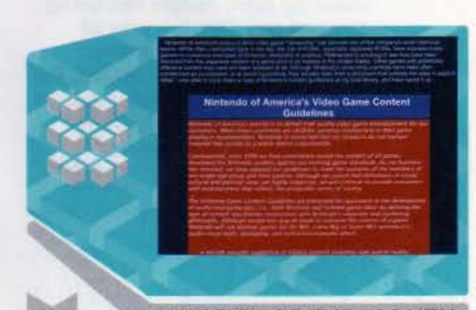
OUT THERE



MICROSOFT CATCHES UP WITH MODDERS

It's only taken them a couple of years, but it looks like Microsoft has finally produced something for a (retail, non-modified) Xbox to rival the chipped machine's Xbox Media Center. The Media Center Extender (see prototype, left) uses an infrared receiver to talk to a PC running Windows Media Center, and allows access to all that PC's media on the Xbox. Which means, finally, those uninterested in ruining their warranty and playing Russian roulette with a soldering iron can experience what everyone else has been raving about for a while. The unit, retailing at just under $80 (£45), should be out in the US by the time you read this.

• www.microsoft.com



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Did you know that Nintendo of America routinely replaces red-cross health logos in its videogames with unchristian hearts? Or that any references to beer in Japanese Nintendo games are changed to 'pop' for their western release? Well, you do now, and you'll know plenty more if you visit this site. Actually, it's not so much a website as an extended, single-page essay on NOA's often-decried censorship policies, but it's more than fascinating enough to warrant a mention here. Plus there's a screenshot of Bowser making an offensive hand gesture. What's not to like?

Site: Nintendo censorship
URL: www.filibustercartoons.com/Nintendo.php





The things people say about videogames

"Nintendo's customers – including many children and their parents – have come to identify the Nintendo trademark(s)/works with the high quality of Nintendo products. Your unauthorised use of the Nintendo trademark(s)/works will tarnish Nintendo's reputation."
Nintendo's legal response to a user's profile on porn site suicidegirls.com that listed *Zelda* and *Metroid* as their favourite games.

"The defective Xboxes stop working after minimal usage, after unreasonably, unconscionably, unusually and unexpectedly short amounts of time"
More legal shenanigans, this time from Xbox owner Sean Burke, suing Microsoft after his console stopped working after a month. Class action ahoy…

"Virtual worlds are being designed by know-nothing newbies, and there's not a damned thing anyone can do about it. I don't mean newbie designers, I mean newbie players – first timers. They're dictating design through a twisted 'survival of the not-quite-fittest' form of natural selection that will lead to a long-term decay in quality, guaranteed."
Richard Bartle, co-creator of *MUD*, rails against modern-day MMORPGS.

"*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is very violent [and includes] shooting cops. People like being the bad guy. This is a way of acting out a stupid fantasy… *Halo 2* is every bit as violent, but the things that you are shooting don't look like people. They look like space suit guys."
Wedbush Morgan Securities analyst Michael Pachter explains game violence to Reuters

INTERVIEW

Rome wasn't built in a day

Mike Simpson, development director of The Creative Assembly, talks life after Total War

What happened the day *Rome: Total War* went gold? Was there a flurry of champagne corks, or did everyone drag themselves home to bed?

For most of the team the last day was mostly spent waiting. We were fixing the last few issues, making a build and testing it. Most people ended up just playing the game all day. We went round that loop a few times, but by late afternoon we were done. There's then a quite long process to go through to get the build out the door. All the variant builds have to be compiled – unprotected, Safedisk and dongled (for the localisers). They're then zipped up, checked, copied, checked, burned on to DVD, unzipped, tested, and finally sent on their way to the publisher. There's not really anything for the team to do during this period. We can't go home in case anything goes wrong and we have to go round the loop again (which happened several times). So, as the evening wore on we played the game some, and people gradually drifted away, until about half a dozen were left. We spent the last six hours playing *Mashed* on the PS2, finally crawling home at about four in the morning.

"I can't tell you how good it feels to emerge from the trenches into the dazzling light of unrestrained adoration from thousands upon thousands of raving fans"

What was the very last thing to be fixed? Was there anything which had to be abandoned or removed at the last minute?

The last thing we fixed was a bug in the assassins, where they could end up trying to kill a guy who had just died of old age. It took a few attempts (and loops round the build process) to fix the unexpected consequences of the fixes. We did give up on one last fix we intended to make – the game writes out log files tracking stats on traits and advice, and we intended to turn them off, but they refused to go, and by 2am we gave up. No harm done.

What did the team do on the day the game hits the shops? Did anyone go around re-arranging shelves to make sure *Rome* was at the front?

We had a good look around the shops. I was on holiday, so I went round EB, Virgin, and Best Buy in Miami, checking that the Activision marketing machine was doing its job in the US, that copies were available and all the POS was in place. We didn't have to re-arrange the shelves – as *Rome* was already at the front. They had done a great job.

How does the team feel about reviews? Are they anxiously awaited or are they completely ignored?

Review scores are posted on our newsgroups as they come in, often along with the reviews. We pay a lot of attention to gamerankings.com – a great site that tracks all the reviews every game gets, works out an average score, and then ranks the games. After 60 or so reviews *Rome* averages 92.8 per cent, making it the best PC strategy game ever written (apart from *Starcraft: Brood Wars*, which I don't count because it's an add-on and only has 12 reviews). It also makes it the seventh best PC game of all time. So, we do really care about all the reviews, probably worrying more about our gamerankings position than we do about sales. We'd been waiting with baited breath for some time to hear **Edge**'s verdict – and were really pleased that you gave it a whopping 9/10!

Rome's development started soon after *Medieval* was completed, running in parallel with expansions for the latter. This long timeframe explains its highly impressive engine



Mike Simpson started out writing Spectrum games and has been with Creative from the beginning, working on all the *Total War* projects to date

We do get very upset when we get an unfair review. *Rome* has only had one – GameInformer – the biggest multiformat mag in the US. They gave it 77 per cent when all the other reviews were over 90 per cent. It wouldn't have been so bad if the review had picked on the weakest parts of the game. We have our list of the things we know can be made even better for the next game, and their gripes just weren't on it. Without that review our average would be 93 per cent, and that hurts even more than the fact they've told all their subscribers not to bother buying *Rome*. It's not fair, but there's nothing we can do except break out the voodoo dolls and order some more chickens.

How has the reception been for players so far? Have they picked up on anything you didn't foresee? Have they made the game do anything you didn't know it could do?
The response has been overwhelming. We've been working so hard for the last nine months we didn't have the time to sit back and look at what we'd done. I can't tell you how good it feels to emerge from the trenches into the dazzling light of unrestrained adoration from thousands upon thousands of raving fans. The hardcore fans do dig deep, and come up with some very insightful comments. Usually, we're aware of the issues, but it does help us develop a consensus view on the way to deal with them. The modders are already deep into the guts of the game figuring out how to change it. The most surprising thing they've done so far is to make the wonders of the world – things like the pyramids – appear in the distance when you fight a battle nearby. I've no idea how they did that.

What proportion of the team stays working on the game after it's released?
There is a gradual transition from working on patches and updates in to working on the next thing. We don't just forget about it once it's in the box. We listen to the feedback on the forums, and tweak, fix and polish the game ready to issue a new patch. Having half a million people playing the game inevitably finds things that can be improved, and multiplayer is one area we'll keep working on all the way to the next release. At this point about 20 (out of an overall team of 77) people are



spending some or all of their time working on the patch.

How does The Creative Assembly manage the transition from one project to the next?
When we finished *Shogun* we started two new projects in parallel. *Medieval* was an ambitious evolution of the *Shogun* technology and codebase, and was a two-year project. *Rome* was a revolution – new core technology, fresh and clean codebase and a four-year project. The aim was to make sure that we are the ones who make the game that blows away the previous one, and the competition doesn't ever overtake us. Combine that with add-ons and we get a release every year and a head start on a technology curve that is so steep no one else can catch us.

How important for the success of the studio is this policy? Is the idea of 'one game, one team' viable anymore?
Sure, 'one game, one team' works once, or even twice, but if you just keep churning out the same game with different content your market lead gradually bleeds away and you eventually get left terminally behind – like the *C&C* series.

What's next for The Creative Assembly?
We have a huge list of things we'd like to do in future *Total War* strategy games. Some of these are new technologies, some are new mechanics for gameplay, and some are whole new areas we haven't included in the games so far. Our aim is to make the 'perfect' strategy game that everyone will enjoy. Then comes the next revolutionary design, where the aim is to astound everyone by doing things which are clearly impossible. Like every developer we also have our secret project that we're not talking about yet – but I'm not going to talk about that yet.



SPECIAL REPORT

The devil in development

Koei adapt Kurosawa's unfilmed Oni for PS3

Akira Kurosawa's body of work continues to be very much alive in Japan: his classic Seven Samurai licence was recently optioned by both animation studios and game developers, with varying results. Gonzo's Samurai 7 series put a sci-fi spin on the tale to good effect, whereas Sammy's *Seven Samurai 20XX* was considerably less successful.

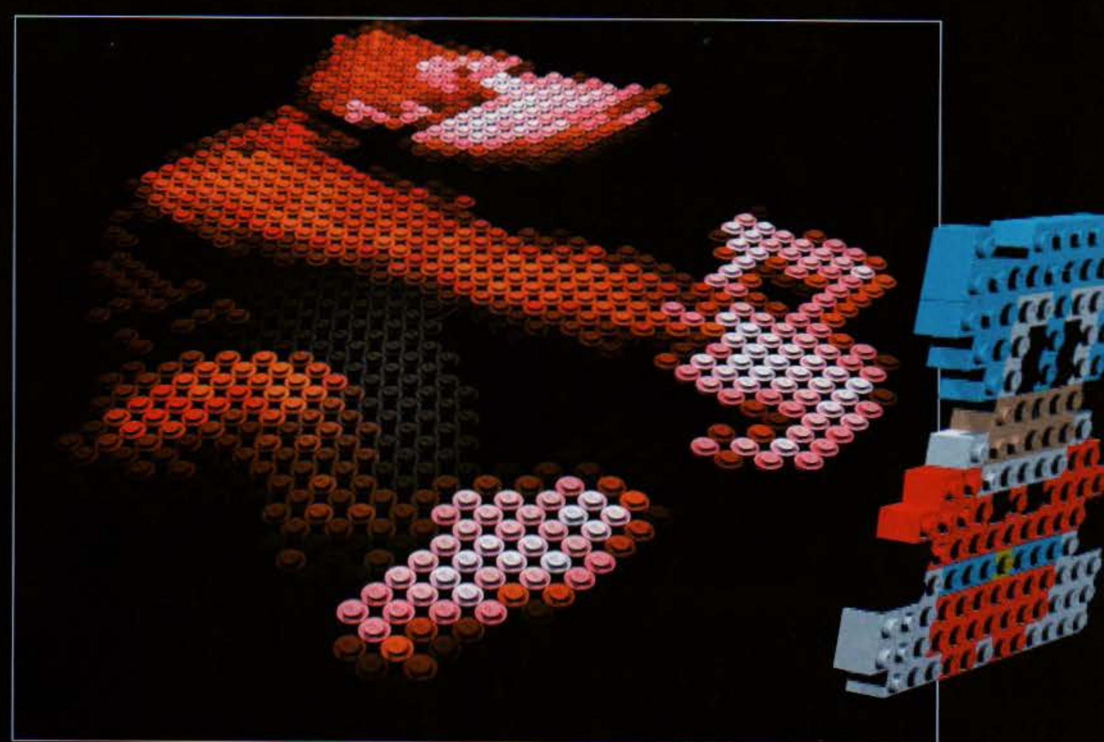
Hisao Kurosawa, chairman of his father's film company, recently attempted a different take on the Kurosawa legacy by approaching Koei to adapt an unfilmed work, Oni, into an animation series. Deciding Oni would be better served as a live-action film than anime, Koei has founded a film production company with that aim in mind, and is set to develop Oni as a film and game tie-in with a total budget of ¥3 billion. The two will be co-developed in a process Koei likens to that of *Enter The Matrix*, with motion capture, CG and set design shared between the two projects. Obviously undaunted by Square's disastrous entry into film production (at least Oni is bolstered by the promise of a strong script, supposedly being the base from which Kurosawa produced Ran), Koei intends to shift its future operations to this 'media mix' model of concurrent development over online, mobile, games, film and print media.

Of most interest to the Japanese industry is the choice of platform for the *Oni* game, naturally the third PlayStation. Koei chairman Yoichi Erikawa feels the budget for PS3 games will rival that of Hollywood features, and that famous licences will be a requirement to offset these development costs. *Oni* is also to be network compatible, suggesting that the PS3 will be natively online, and Koei intends to make heavy use of that functionality in the next generation.

Both game and movie are scheduled for release in 2006: Koei is currently in the process of a public casting call for an 'extraordinary individual' – a western one at that – to be its leading man.





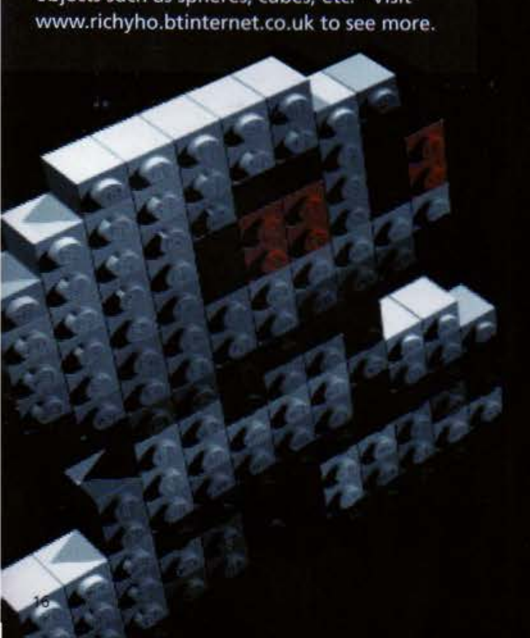


ART

But it is art (continued)

Legends from gaming's past get captivating 3D overhaul

The images on this page may be iconic, but you may need to focus a little harder in order to appreciate that you've never seen them looking quite like this. That's because they're the work of UK artist **Richard Horsman**, who uses his own software to "drag the 2D source images kicking and screaming into the third dimension with the original pixels being replaced by combinations of primitive objects such as spheres, cubes, etc." Visit www.richyho.btinternet.co.uk to see more.







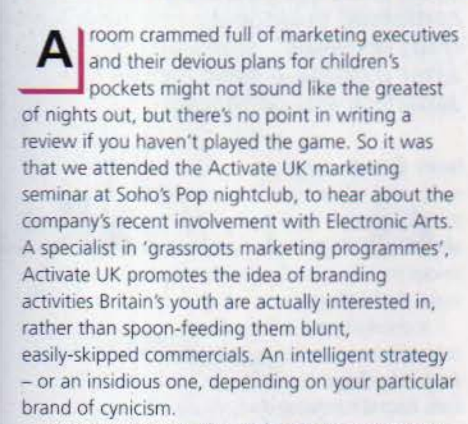
Students gather to enjoy the latest EA games. Out of shot: instant noodles, empty bottle of cheap wine, photocopied lecture notes, traffic cone



EVENT

Activate UK brings games to UK campuses

EA goes back to university, and chooses modules in marketing and partying



A room crammed full of marketing executives and their devious plans for children's pockets might not sound like the greatest of nights out, but there's no point in writing a review if you haven't played the game. So it was that we attended the Activate UK marketing seminar at Soho's Pop nightclub, to hear about the company's recent involvement with Electronic Arts. A specialist in 'grassroots marketing programmes', Activate UK promotes the idea of branding activities Britain's youth are actually interested in, rather than spoon-feeding them blunt, easily-skipped commercials. An intelligent strategy – or an insidious one, depending on your particular brand of cynicism.

Introduced by Activate CEO **Thomas Godfrey** instructing his speakers to "bust a few myths about youth," there were three main strands to the evening. The first saw a synopsis of some research done into the type of things kids like, subtitled The Emperor Isn't Listening To An iPod. It turns out that young people do not live in a 'hyperconsumerist postmodernist world', and that everyone likes David Beckham. 'The problem with youth marketing is the people who work in youth marketing,' caused the first nervous laughter of the night. The second strand, on MTV's bid to get sponsored music video editing lessons into classrooms by providing equipment and lesson plans to overworked teachers, proved as interesting as it was morally troubling. "They're not interesting to us as 13-year-olds," said MTV's representative, "But by the time they're 16 or 17, they're *phenomenally* interesting to us."

And so arrived the videogaming. Activate UK is working with EA to operate a pilot scheme of 'student ambassadors' in five universities across the country. The students are Electronic Arts' representatives on campus, but in a way that's slightly more sophisticated than plastering posters across notice boards and shoving keyrings in freshers' packs. Each student is paid a nominal sum for the year's work, provided with a PlayStation2 and Xbox console, and receives copies of EA releases as soon as they hit the shops. It's their job to take them to house parties and organise competitions. The idea is that it reintroduces gaming to an audience that's either too poor or too busy to rediscover it for themselves, and brands that idea with a big EA logo. Equally, the students get work experience and free games.

The miniature Machiavellis' part in today's activities was to line up dutifully at the front of the stage and answer questions from the assembled

This is genuinely a mutually beneficial relationship. Everyone appears to be getting something out of the arrangement, be it entertainment or investment in the future

marketeers. One slightly-off-topic question – 'how can we sell things to you?' – was met with the innocent response of "Just tell the truth!" from one of the students, and more nervous laughter. But it was their bemused responses to our suspicious, loaded questions that really convinced us that this is genuinely a mutually beneficial relationship. Everyone appears to be getting something out of the arrangement, be it entertainment or investment in the future. And if EA's claims that all it wants to do is bring more people to gaming, whatever games they chose to buy, are true – and why wouldn't they be, given that they own 26 per cent of the market – it may turn out that Activate UK's unselfish marketing outlook is something more than surface deep.

Newswire

Argonaut ended

Britsoft old guard Argonaut went into administration in late October, suffering a 'cash crisis' resulting from a troubled record of cancelled or long-delayed, under-delivering titles. While the group's Edgware HQ and Sheffield studio (formerly sci-fi developer Particle Systems) were closed down in the following weeks, former CEO and founder of Argonaut, Jez San, followed his resignation from the company by buying out its two remaining subsidiaries, Morpheme and Just Add Monsters.

BC suspended

Another October casualty was *BC*, Lionhead satellite Intrepid Games' prehistoric tribal simulation. In development for four years and a high-profile European Xbox title alongside Big Blue Box's *Fable*, work was 'suspended' on the project after an internal decision at Lionhead. In a statement on the suspension, Lionhead MD Peter Molyneux expressed hope to continue *BC*'s development at a later date, as well as the company's intention to reassign Intrepid staff to other Lionhead projects.





EVENT

A Private Show filled with promise

Sliding Ferraris, fighting robots and SNK battlers: the more things change, the more they stay the same...





Another Japanese autumn, another Sega Private Show: but this show was even less private than usual, with Sega's new partner Sammy sharing floor space. Even with the two publishers combined there were few new titles on display – unsurprising after a cautious year for the Japanese arcade market – and Sega's good cheer was largely due to attendance numbers breaking the ten million mark at its network of Joypolis centres, a detour into theme park entertainment.

The popularity of such diversions was evident elsewhere at the event, with Sega showing UFO catchers based on its *Mushi King* beetle-sumo licence to up its popularity with the younger market, and Sammy revealing a line of simple child-oriented games running on the ubiquitous Atomiswave board. Sega is "still considering" developing for the low-cost board, which would be a step down from the current Naomi hardware, let alone its Chihiro board of choice (news on the progress of the next-generation Naomi board was also conspicuously absent).

Of the new arcade titles present, the first game from the former Wow studio (now re-established as AM1), *Sangokushi Taisen*, showed an impressive dedication to addressing all of the modern Japanese arcade's vogue features. Running on a Chihiro platform with network support for four-cabinet multiplay, *Sangokushi Taisen* is a feudal strategy game played with real trading cards. Each card is embedded with a microchip, which when laid on the cabinet's play table creates its corresponding unit on the main screen. The table is sensitive to orientation and placing, and units can be repositioned by moving the cards across the table – a system previously used in Hitmaker's *World Club Champion Football*.

Other than the slick interface, battle appears to be a fairly standard (read: infinitely complicated) paper-scissors-stone affair as both sides jostle to break the other's defences. Victories are saved to an IC card, allowing the network system to match the player's level with an appropriate challenger, and as with most of Sega's trading card titles, a bonus trading card is awarded after each play to stoke the addiction.

Even with the two publishers combined there were few new titles on show – unsurprising after a cautious year for the Japanese arcade market

A comfortingly lower-maintenance debut was that of *Senko No Ronde*, the new title from *Border Down* developer G.rev. Like its previous success, it uses Naomi hardware and features 3D graphics on a 2D plane; but the similarities end there, much to the puzzlement of fans expecting another scrolling shooter. Instead, the game is a a one-on-one robot

Card-battling licence *Mushi King* has won the hearts and pockets of the youth market – and David Cronenberg would likely approve of the related toy line



The show was certainly a small step in the right direction, if not quite a great leap for arcades. But Sega was never going to regain its balance overnight



Maybe it's just us getting old, but the *Special Tours* sit-in cabinets were a reassuring anchor of familiarity in the mercurial Japanese arcade environment







Sangokushi Taisen might not be what western audiences have in mind when they think of a sit-in cabinet, but it's more frantic than the card game aspect might suggest, with battles running to a strict time limit. The touch control, too, is strangely engaging

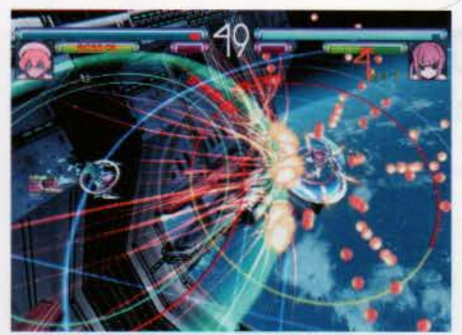
brawler, possessing more than enough flair to ensure those same players quickly became enthusiastic converts.

The three-button control scheme allows access to dashes, a protective shield and two projectile attacks – though the term seems a poor label for the resulting *Bangai-O*-style proliferation of bullets. Encroaching on an opponent's personal space draws the camera in on the two opponents for a close combat mode, allowing that familiar military waltz of encirclement, side-step and sword thrust. Any damage taken during a match also charges the Boss gauge, which when filled provides a screen-sweeping melee attack to turn the tables on your opponent – especially if activated when one hit from destruction, triggering an even more destructive Final Boss state.

Due for release in Japan's arcades by mid-2005, it also seems likely, though not explicitly confirmed, *Senko No Ronde* will join the list of posthumous Dreamcast releases after its run in the arcades.

Sega's final new offering was a December update for *OutRun 2, Special Tours*, offering 15 new courses and two new Ferraris (the 250GTO and 512BB, both already available in the Xbox version). Internet ranking will also feature for all the game's modes, and new challenges are also to be added to the Heart Attack section – possibly drawing on those from Sumo's Xbox port.

Sammy's star attraction was a playable version of *SNK Battle Coliseum*, which though presenting few surprises in terms of the game system (the same five-button configuration as *King Of Fighters: NeoWave* and a standard tag-team setup) proved a







Something for every taste from the Sega side, then, if not the Naomi 3 new wave observers have been clamouring for since the start-of-year Private Show. 2005 will be the year for the reorganised AM divisions to deliver on that promise

fan favourite on the strength of its character roster alone. Already crowded with entrants from across SNK's history and obscurity – *Fatal Fury* to *Buriki One*, *Art Of Fighting* to *Aggressors Of Dark Combat* – SNK Playmore hinted that even more may appear as unlockable characters. Yet, there is a concern that, in its enthusiasm to pack the house, the developer may be overstretching itself: with the game currently only 30 per cent complete and no release date yet decided, it's easy to imagine development continuing for as long as there are characters to add. A considerably advanced version is due for the February AOU show, though, suggesting lines have been drawn – either way, it represents one of Sammy and SNK Playmore's most important titles to date in a 2005 of hopeful arcade promise.

OUT THERE



N-GAGE GETS SLIGHTLY LESS EMBARRASSING

While the original N-Gage seems destined to become a comedy footnote in handheld gaming history, there are still thousands of them out there, and consequently there are thousands of people getting somewhat annoyed at the ludicrous lengths you have to go to to change games. Stress no more: modding expert mashmods.com has come up with a homebrew solution. Essentially comprising an SD card connector glued to the back of the case, the device negates the need to remove the battery every time you want to change your game, as well as enabling hot-swapping – the ability to switch games without turning off the device. Find out how at www.mashmods.com – coming next month, a mod to avoid the embarrassment of sidetalkin' in public. It's a paper bag.

• www.mashmods.com

OUT THERE



RETRO MUSIC

Time was that everyone who played videogames could fit under the broad banner of nerd. Now the hobby's so big it's split into different subcultures of insults: AV nerd, emulation nerd, 16bit nerd, chip-music nerd, Sega nerd and so on. Consider those five subcultures united, though, by DC Evolution's SC68 project, a Dreamcast disk that contains 1,800 Atari ST and Amiga tunes for you to listen to. Based on Benjamin Gerard's Dream68 player, the contents are sure to stir memories for those who spent the early '90s hanging around bulletin board systems and protesting the death of their favourite home computer.

• www.dcevolution.net

EVENT



One of the high profile Game Republic members looking to benefit from the prototyping scheme is Revolution Software's MD, Charles Cecil

Fresh start for games

Access to cash and risk reduction are the key elements of a new prototyping pilot scheme on offer from Yorkshire's Game Republic and backed by the likes of Sony, Microsoft and Take Two

GAMEREPUBLIC.

Over the years, there have been plenty of attempts to reduce the financial and creative risks of game development. From innovative funding models to incubator studios and guru producers, few have resulted in completed games, let alone successful companies. The latest initiative from games trade alliance Game Republic and regional screen agency Screen Yorkshire hopes to make a difference, however.

Labelled the Game Republic Integrated Prototype Production (GRIPP) programme, it's an 18-month pilot scheme designed to provide developers with early feedback on concepts, as well as partial funding to take those ideas through to working prototypes. And the reason for such confidence is the support of console format holders such as Sony, Microsoft and Nokia, as well as publishers including Take Two, SCi and Konami.

The initial pot of £250,000 for co-funding game prototypes is offered by Screen Yorkshire from cash provided by regional development agency Yorkshire First and the European Union

"It was vital to get the format holders on board," explains Game Republic's general manager **Michael Crampton**, who adds that Nintendo is expected to join the programme next year. "Previously, developers and publishers have had to rely on approval towards the end of a project, after significant money has been expended. This agreement marks the first time console format holders will commit to concept approval at such an early stage."

An additional benefit will be the availability of hardware development kits for developers accepted into the scheme, while the other significant aspect of GRIPP is its use of public funding. A standard element of film production, the initial pot of £250,000 for co-funding game prototypes is offered by Screen Yorkshire from cash provided by regional development agency Yorkshire First and the European Union. A further sum of £250,000 is potentially available depending on how the scheme progresses.



Game Republic's general manager, Michael Crampton, says GRIPP provides a new opportunity for Yorkshire's gaming developers



One of the publishers supporting GRIPP is Take Two, which was represented at its launch by its European business development manager (and ex-Edge deputy editor) David McCarthy

Each accepted project will be funded by up to £50,000, which must be matched by a similar investment from the developer itself, to create a working prototype. This can then be used to attract further funds either from other investors or via the standard publisher route. Alternatively, it may be decided at that point to halt the project because it's not working out. The funding only needs to be repaid, plus a small margin, if a game is commercially released.

Yet Crampton is also keen to stress that GRIPP remains a pilot scheme: "We just don't know how it will work out," he says. "It may be that we find out only one in 100 games funded makes it. Alternatively, we may find our hit-rate is one in two, in which case it would make sense to increase the amount of funding available."

Of course, the regional focus does mean only member companies of Game Republic, which spans the Yorkshire and Humber region, will be eligible, although Crampton does point out that this caveat is a means of attracting inward investment: "If a company external to the region has a game concept, then they can link up with a Game Republic member for some element of the production process, and that member would be able to submit the game."

More generally, he thinks the pilot will provide encouragement for other regions to start up similar schemes. "There's a lot of activity in this area at the moment," he says. "There are nine screen agencies and ten regional development agencies; hopefully this will provide an example for others to follow."

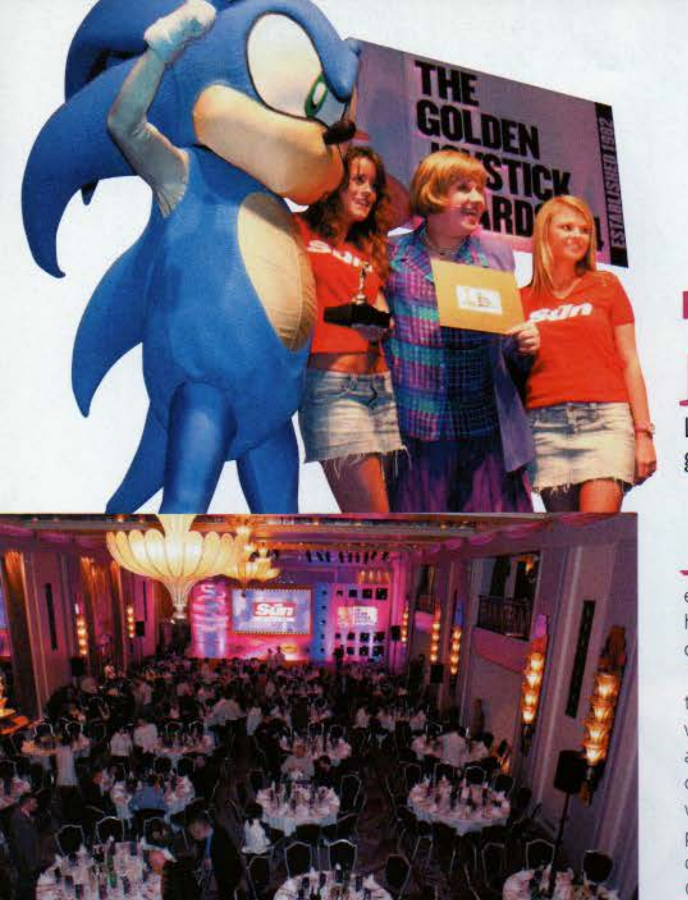
OUT THERE



VIDEOGAMES: SUPERCOOL, HONEST

Videogames' dogged pursuit of The Cool continues apace, and everyone knows there's nowt so cool as celebrity. Perhaps that's why Microsoft's US PR division invented The Playaz Club, an 'elite' group of fifty celebrities who get the indulgent benefit of receiving games and party invites for free (ie being on Microsoft's PR list). But now Spears, Timberlake, Duff and Theron have been snubbed in favour of a more compact, even-elite-r group: The *Halo 2* Council, a seven-member clique of *Halo* fanatics. The group – featuring members of Hoobastank, Linkin Park, and actors Wilmer Valderrama, Benjamin McKenzie and Aisha Tyler – each received a Pelican Case, a specially-constructed portable Xbox console with a screen mounted in a suitcase and preloaded with *Halo 2*. "There are probably a lot of bands that would kill for this briefcase," said Hoobastank's Doug Robb. Well, probably not those with access to the internet and a basic knowledge of French...

Halo 2: currently being played by trendy nu-metal 'celebrities' in a special case near you. En anglais



AWARDS

Joy at the Joysticks

Little Britain's Marjorie Dawes hands out the gongs at the UK's oldest gaming awards

"Hello. Yes. Hello. Yes. Yes. Hello. Hello. Yes. YES. YES. HELLO." No matter how hard he made everyone laugh it was difficult to feel that compere Matt Lucas was earning his no doubt astronomical appearance fee. However, his sound knowledge of games meant *Metroid* didn't get called 'Meetroid', and lent the whole show a confident air.

The Joysticks are voted for by gamers, and 200,000 took part this year, a substantial increase on previous awards. The biggest winner was *Doom 3*, which took home both PC Game Of The Year and Ultimate Game Of The Year (although the latter category had a cut-off which excluded both *San Andreas* and *Halo 2*). Other system winners were *Burnout 3*, *Fable* and *Mario Kart: Double Dash*. Sonic put on a surprisingly strong show, dusting off his party sneakers to collect Best Handheld Game for *Sonic Advance DX* and Ultimate Gaming Hero, courtesy of readers of The Sun. Warren Spector, who has just announced his departure from Ion Storm (see page 11), was inducted into the Golden Joysticks' Gaming Hall Of Fame.



The aftershow party was easy to find - not many swanky bars in Mayfair come equipped with giant robots, girls in spandex and cocktails the colour – and flavour – of car windscreen de-icer

Newswire



Half-Life 2 gets extra life

Given the love/hate relationship Japan has with the firstperson shooter – mostly it hates them, but some days it really loves to hate them – it seems a little peculiar that Taito has announced it's making a *Half-Life 2* arcade machine. Still, this doesn't look like a half-arsed sop to the (minimal) western market. Using a dedicated pod with widescreen display and 5.1 channel sound, and compatible with the Net Entry System for country-wide co-operative combat, it looks like PC and arcade gaming may no longer be separate circles on the great Venn diagram of videogames. And more intersection titles are on the way: since Taito's Type X arcade board is essentially a modified PC running an embedded version of Windows XP, ports (theoretically) should come quick and easy – indeed, a version of *Unreal Tournament* has also been announced.

The release date for *Half-Life 2*'s arcade cousin is down as summer 2005, but given Valve's record of procrastination, expect the east to go motion-sickness crazy sometime in late 2007.

AT A STORE NEAR YOU

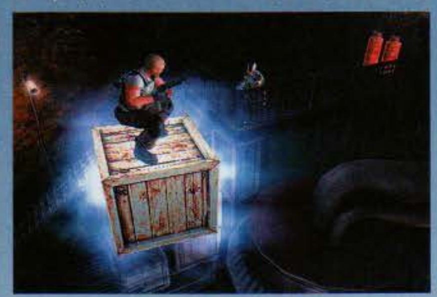
Games hitting the shelves this month

Second Sight (PC) — E141, 7/10 (Xbox version)



"Despite its irritations and its occasionally threadbare set-dressing, this is a smart, fun, forward thinking work... a true British original"

Psi Ops (PC) — E139, 8/10 (PS2 version)



"A rock-solid thirdperson blaster at heart. Intelligently calibrated, it is as imaginative as it is competent and as considerate as it is demanding"

Tales of Symphonia (GC) — E141, 8/10



***Tales Of Symphonia*'s action-based combat is "a satisfying and often stunning spectacle, and one which still reveals subtleties hours into the game"**

Final Fantasy I&II (GBA)



After the wait for *FFXI*, the wait for *FFXII* seems to stretch out even further. This GBA re-jig dusts off the originals and might well help tide you over

INTERVIEW

Halo 2 brought to book

Piggyback Interactive has spent the last four months inside Bungie, preparing the official guide. Founder Victor Pargney explains the process



Bungie was so heavily involved with the guide project that it hired a designer specifically to produce all the maps for the guide in 3ds Max, ensuring their accuracy, as well as incorporating the Piggyback team into its studios at Redmond

How tight was security around *Halo 2*?
Once the guide left the printing press, our 'no spoiler' guarantee meant we needed to take additional precautions, so the guide was shipped under specially coded, non-*Halo 2* branded boxes for added security.

The game was still in development while you were there. Were there a lot of changes while you were writing the guide?
Developing the guide was like trying to take a close range photo of a train travelling at 200mph. In the early stages the game was incomplete, which meant the guide evolved with the game. During the last seven weeks of game development, the rate of change was phenomenal. We received our daily code updates, and there was always so much more to capture. But we matched Bungie's pace and the guide reflects all the changes in the game.

The first *Halo* was exceptional. Did you get a sense of what it is about Bungie that enabled it to achieve what so few teams can?
Mostly, what stood out was their amazing capacity to project manage the game combined with a unified vision of what they wanted to achieve. And when they weren't working on *Halo 2*, they were playing *Halo 2*.

Was it a hard game to write a guide for? After all, there isn't much in the way of secrets, it's pretty linear, and uses the same core skills throughout the game.
The game really exceeded our expectations in terms of complexity – the game areas are vast and there are so many modes to write for. The multiplayer experience could be a standalone book in its own right. For us to create the gamer's bible for a title it's inevitable for it to consume around 10,000 man-hours, but having to do it in just four months meant the team worked 18 hour days.

Were you sick of the sight of it by the end?
No, we're all mad about the game – really. When it's released, our guys will lose themselves in the *Halo 2* world for countless more nights and weekends. It's a tough job…



Continue

Sony parties
Bewitching, brightly coloured cocktails: beautiful but deadly

Massively multiplayer Hello Kitty
Oh. My. God

A PC for Half-Life 2
= no holiday in 2005

Quit

Doom 3
It was just really boring, actually, wasn't it?

PSP battery life
It's OK, we loved the Atari Lynx

Broken SingStar mics
Who knew they could be fixed with gardening tape?

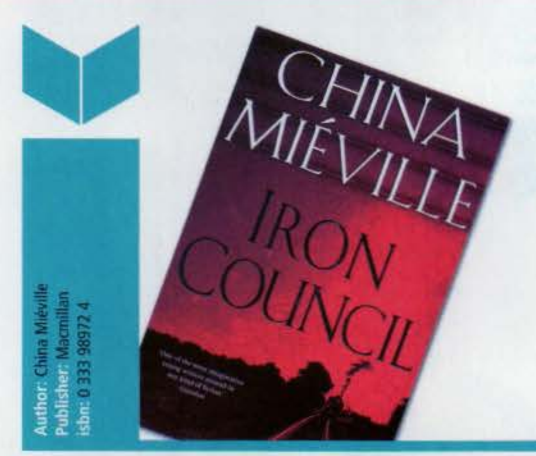
Author: James Newman/Iain Simons (eds)
Publisher: PublicBeta
isbn: 0 9548825 0 4

DIFFICULT QUESTIONS ABOUT VIDEOGAMES

The sort of thing we've been asking for years, now in book form

First outing for UK games culture publisher and live events outfit PublicBeta, Difficult Questions About Videogames provides a cross-section of views on the current state of play. Pooled from the responses of 71 contributors, ranging from industry figures such as Warren Spector and Jez San to more ordinary developers, academics, gamers and even the odd journalist, each gave their thoughts on up to 13 questions. These cover simple queries from 'where do you play and for how long?' to more teasing investigations such as 'what is gameplay?' and 'what will videogames become?' The results make for an interesting, if dense, read. Laid out in unedited blocks of text, this isn't the sort of book you'll devour in a single sitting. Instead, it has more of a nibbly feel to it, providing a continual stream of small nuggets. Overall, however, the main conclusion seems to be the pleasing amount of variation in views. From the 16-year-old who wants to be plugged into the game, Gibson-style, to the developer who now won't play games if there's the opportunity for social interaction with friends, the book makes for a stimulating sounding board. For an industry too often focused on the hardcore, Difficult Questions About Videogames demonstrates that videogame culture is already a much broader church than most give it credit for. Of course, there's still a long way to go, but with this book and its future plans for live events based around the concept, PublicBeta seems to be pushing all the right buttons.

Author: China Miéville
Publisher: Macmillan
isbn: 0 333 98972 4



IRON COUNCIL

Railfans, gricers and bashers rejoice, it's a 'weird fiction' novel about a train

Trains have always possessed totemic value for noir fantasy writers; hence the very term steampunk. Summoning up an atmosphere of technological degradation, they also place the reader in an environment where real things such as cogs, greasy pistons and workers' rights matter. So it is that China Miéville goes for broke, with the Iron Council of his title a renegade train. Hijacked 20 years ago by the workers, it ploughs across a bleak, alien continent, pulling up its rails and using them to continue the flight. But back in the sprawling totalitarian citystate of New Crobuzon – setting for a previous novel, and the Iron Council's origin – the unrest is growing, thanks to an unusual mixture of lighting strikes, bowler hatted cults and other assorted magicians, gangsters and turncoats. Reduced to the status of a whispered myth, can the Iron Council's return affect the status quo?

This might not sound too different from the usual fare or even that enticing, but what sets Miéville apart is his use of language. Rich in the weft of what he likes to call weird fiction (not fantasy), it will certainly have you reaching for your dictionary, if only to check whether the likes of thaumaturge are made-up. (In this case, no.) Deeper-than-expected characterisation is another strong point, with the mainstays locked within an uneasy bisexual triangle. So even with an ending that smacks of Hollywood sequel syndrome, Iron Council provides plenty to get excited about, even for those without the locomotive bug.



DEVELOPER DIARY

Tameem Antoniades, now of Ninja Theory, continues his next-gen story...

Last month I covered the first three months of 2003 and why we started a next-gen game a year or more before most developers would even consider doing this and several years before we imagined next-gen kits would even appear. Going next-gen has some pretty big implications on a company's strategy. It can change everything!

For one, the complete rejection of any game that could be considered 'cartoony' will only get stronger. Thinking back to all previous gaming breakthroughs, the drive towards realism and immersion has always led the way even if purists of the time sometimes dislike it. Once again, the purists will be driven out of the games industry as punters and publishers vote with their wallets.

So we started thinking about style in terms of cinematography, costume and set design, action choreography, dynamic camera direction and performance rather than character proportions and rendering tricks.

I'd like to think that the next-gen game experience should not be about any single gameplay, rendering or hardware gimmick. Nor should it be about pigeonhole genres. I believe that the next-gen will kick-start the rise of games as a sophisticated entertainment medium as powerful as film, music and literature: the tenth art. There, I said it.

Achieving this goal wasn't going to be cheap, quick or easy, so we immediately abandoned our plans to become a two-game studio. In a hit-driven business all efforts must focus on creating hits, so diluting our focus across multiple teams is not going to work.

We started thinking about style in terms of cinematography, costume, set design, choreography, dynamic camera direction and performance rather than character proportions

Creatively, we looked beyond Blade Runner-wannabes, Tolkien-wannabes, sports, racing or war games. A basic principle of market positioning is to not go head-to-head against the heavyweights: gangster games belong to *GTA*, sports belong to EA and colas belong to Coca-Cola. The odds are overwhelmingly stacked against you should you try and take them on. All of these products were once pioneers going against the grain and that's why they are dominant now.

I think that to stand a good chance of success, you need three things: a great game, a great mind-share position and the hype of the gods. So what better time than at the start of an exciting new console generation to position yourself with a statement of style and beauty? And to start early enough to craft an amazing gaming experience that truly could not exist on current-gen hardware? If we pull this off, the hype will sort itself out.

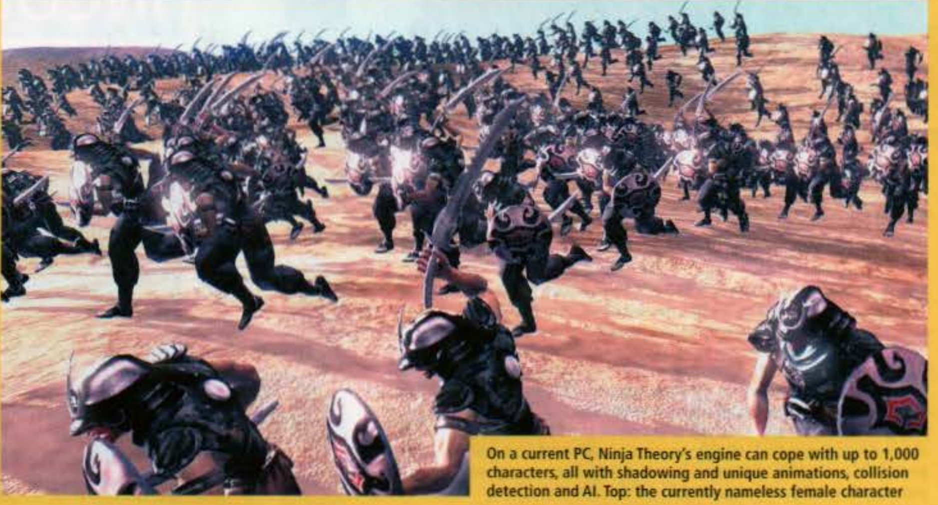
However, trying to create something new with a publisher's money can have serious consequences. It's not uncommon for games to be pigeon-holed into a single, narrow genre since sales estimates are made easy within these constraints. It is also not uncommon for developers to work under such severe financial or time constraints that they are destined to release sub-par games despite their best efforts and intentions. When these games are released against the heavyweights, really bad things happen.

These are a couple of the myriad reasons why gamers feel they are spoon-fed the same old turd time after time.

As an ambitious independent we want to try something different, something we think will be more successful but we rely on publisher funding. Finding a level of mutual trust and respect with a publishing partner is the only way the developer-publisher relationship can work for the good of both parties and for gamers. To find the right publisher, we first have a lot to prove. So with a team of 22 we got to work. By the summer of 2003, we had some nice tech demos, a full design, a great trailer to back it up and a business plan. Check the movie out at our website: www.justaddmonsters.com/edge

Am I worried that someone will 'steal' our ideas through this kind of article? Not at all. They tried that once when Nina, Mike and I were working from a bedroom pitching *Kung Fu Chaos* to a certain publisher. They asked if it would work with a certain licence. We said 'yes', but we didn't want to do that. They were given the entire design for evaluation. They went off, slapped their licence onto it, farmed it out to a developer and released a turkey. You can't steal good execution, so we might as well share what worked and didn't for us, at a time where so many developers will face the same issues, right?

Turning a bold vision into reality and repositioning a company around this was always going to be tough but I could never have imagined just how soul-sapping and painful the next few months would be...



On a current PC, Ninja Theory's engine can cope with up to 1,000 characters, all with shadowing and unique animations, collision detection and AI. Top: the currently nameless female character

While putting this article together, all of Argonaut's subsidiaries were forced into administration – including JAM. It looked like the end of the road for us but together with Jez's backing, Nina, Mike and I managed to rescue the business.

So we are now the UK's newest independent company, run by its original founders with fresh capital and fresh hope. The new company is called Ninja Theory. Why? Because Ninjas Make Better Games. FACT.



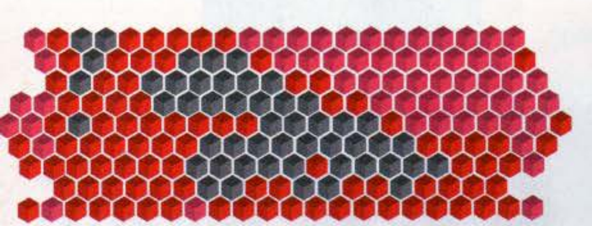
Internet Game Of The Month

Maple Story

www.mapleglobal.com

There's never been a better time to play an MMO, which means there's never been a worse time. What to pick? Play it safe with *Final Fantasy XI* or take a risk on *Ryzom*? Stay loyal to *EverQuest 2* or jump ship to *World Of WarCraft*? What are your friends playing? Nothing. They're dithering just as much as you are, hoping you'll pick first. It's time to break the cycle. *Maple Story* shouldn't really be on this page, since it's not a finished game (it's still in beta) and it's not really an internet game, since it needs a download.

But what it is, is a delightful, lightweight 2D MMORPG. Simple combat, entertaining quests, beautiful environments and cute accessories make it an appealing alternative to reality. Already running full steam ahead in Japan, China and Korea, the game is entirely free, sustaining itself through an in-game shop where the choicest kit can be bought for cash. Once it gets into full swing for the rest of the world, it should offer the perfect antidote for anyone who likes their online crusades to be mini rather than massive.



REDEYE IS...
at the UK launch party for Halo 2



So, RedEye takes one month in five years as holiday, comes back, and everything's changed. It's like finding your house broken into by an overzealous makeover TV show. Nothing's where you left it, the emotional detritus on your shelf is now in a skip outside and your favourite armchair is now half the size.

Still, new brooms and all. And since this is a new start, we should make this a jumping-in point, start where we started last time, and where we occasionally returned to every time our bile reserves were running low: at a games industry launch party, covered in all the emotion that created RedEye in the first place. Wait, that's not emotion; it's beer spittle, fired machine-gun staccato-style by an over-zealous PR person. Still, if it were emotion, it'd be the following, in alphabetical and chronological order: amusement, anger, bravado, confusion, depression, hate, love, nausea and vodka. They say vodka isn't emotion. They're not drinking it right.

This party is for *Halo 2*, a lavish, overfunded affair, Microsoft's marketing budget in full effect. It's one of the better ones, to be honest. The assembled hundreds are marked as a survival party, clustered into the archways beneath London Bridge station and force-fed minimal amounts of alcohol through inefficient holes in the wall. This is the airlock, apparently, and the Covenant are on their way. A clock above a door at one end of the room counts down to zero, to apparent armageddon, and RedEye starts to fantasise: when it reaches zero, the tunnels will fill with carbon monoxide and every ill-mannered ligging reprobate in the videogame industry will take a long, rewarding nap for the rest of time.

Time ticks away to nothing and the fingers stay crossed. The hiss of gas on zero sends him briefly into raptures, but it turns out to be dry ice. The door springs open, a Master Chief character actor performs a victory jig, and the party proper arrives. Life after the end of the world turns out to be much like life before the end of the world, except with more canapés. The people chosen to save civilisation? All of society's great and good, from ham-fisted fat-faced journalists to empty-headed marketeers, from insincere red-nosed advertising execs to games industry hobos without portfolio. What a gene pool. Almost all of them are male.

Procreation is going to be interesting.

Then almost as soon as it's begun, it's over. The drunken throng bolts for the last trains as the clock hits 11, betraying Microsoft's isolationist dream for cosy carriages to faceless satellite towns. Soon, the place is half-empty: stragglers at the bar beg RedEye back to help drain the last of the spirits, but the evening's spirit is gone. These things are for meeting and greeting, but when the only person left is Lady Desperation it's time to leave the lingering smell of dry ice behind. RedEye takes a glance over his shoulder as he heads for the tube: cracked plastic glasses half-full or half-empty, expensive disco lights winking at a near-vacant room, and a large, lonely man dressed in full-body armour made from green plastic. It's good to be back.

INCOMING

Announcements and updates

Ghost In The Shell: Stand Alone Complex

Format: PS2
Publisher: Atari
Expected: March 2005



More clinically reserved than the breakneck PS1 title, Cavia's unique – sometimes unnecessarily so – action-platformer should be bewildering European audiences early next year

Kameo: Elements Of Power

Format: Xbox
Publisher: Microsoft
Expected: TBC



Two years of wedging a Cube-shaped game into an X-shaped hole hasn't been enough, with a further delay announced to the Elf Formerly Known As A Fairy's quest for a demographic

Ninja Project (working title)

Format: PS2
Publisher: Spike
Expected: 2005



Five years after making *Tenchu 2*, Acquire has announced its return to the business of honourable death. The wait is on to discover what style of game will emerge from the shadows

Rifts

Format: N-Gage
Publisher: Nokia
Expected: June 2005



The Rifts tabletop RPG has been a genre-clash apocalypse waiting to be digital for years: Backbone's dedication to the licence might result in the N-Gage's very own *Shadowrun*

Metal Slug Advance

Format: GBA
Publisher: Ignition
Expected: Christmas



Inspired by the Neo-Geo Pocket incarnation of the micro killorama, this version brings a health bar and a card collection sub-game to the mix of hostages and helicopters

Hitman: Blood Money

Format: PC, PS2, Xbox
Publisher: Eidos
Expected: Q1 2005



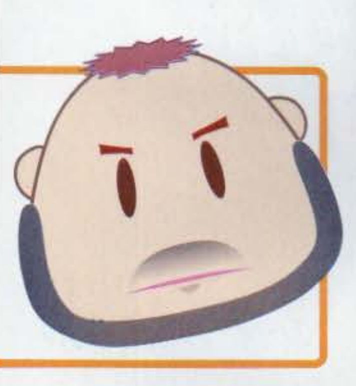
Though the blood's barely cooled on 47's last outing, *Blood Money* intends to bring home the economics of killing, with your options now governed by payment from previous hits

SOMETHING ABOUT

Japan

Happy to be late to the party

Producer/director Brick Bardo considers what the biggest game of the year means to the Japanese



I have such a strange feeling right now. Here is **Edge**, a magazine I love to read, quite a name in the industry in Japan... and I've been given the opportunity to write for it. But about what? Well, as a man from the industry who's worked on quite a few games, I guess there are many things I could write about. But first: let me introduce myself.

I work for a Japanese game maker – a famous one, actually. I work as a producer, and sometimes as a director, according to what's required on a particular project. Since I joined the games industry I have been involved in several action adventure games and also others based on famous licences here in Japan. I'm working hard right now on a new action game for PS2; I have just a couple of months left before the master version is ready, so I probably don't need to tell you that we are in the middle of a very harsh period, and my staff are quite exhausted! But, in a sense, I'm happy that we have a few months to go before the master date, because if we were already at the moment when we had to come out with the master, it would be: 'argh!' Why? Simply because we aren't ready? No, not at all. It is just that at the end of the year, in Japan, something frightening is lurking in the dark – a monster. Am I talking about the launch of two new pieces of hardware – PSP and DS? Well, these are quite big events in themselves, but no, I'm talking about something bigger than them. I'm talking about the mighty *Dragon Quest VIII* on PS2.

"What?! Why that game?" you might ask. I believe it is hard for people outside of Japan to measure the impact of the release of a new *Dragon Quest* title, but in the Japanese games industry a *Dorakue* is always a major event. Just look at these figures: after December 9, 1995, *DQVI* on the Super Famicom sold 3.2m copies. Five years later, *DQVII* on PS1 sold no less than 4.12m in total after its release on August 26, 2000. But you have to look closely at two important factors here: the release dates and the platforms. *DQVI* was released on the Super Famicom a year after the PS1 had become available; *DQVII* was released on PS1 two-and-a-half years after the PS2 was launched.

Yes, Japanese gamers are sensitive to trends and are often moving in a big way in the same direction. So normally when something new, a hot item, is attracting attention, the old one is forgotten as people think of it as a 'has been'. The same rule applies to the wider games industry: when a new console comes on to the market, software for the old one dries up quickly, and the old system finds its place in the closet, where it will be almost forgotten – maybe it will resurface on a rare occasion, but basically it is dead.

This rule does not apply for *Dorakue*. When a new episode is released, people are ready to revive their previous systems purely to enjoy the game.

But why are the Japanese so passionate about *Dragon Quest*? I guess the main reason is that it was the first RPG people enjoyed here. In the west, before the videogame appeared in people's homes there were many pencil-and-paper RPGs, such as Dungeons & Dragons, but in Japan these games did not find their way into our lives. Why? Well, Japanese people are very shy. The real thrill with these pencil-and-paper RPGs is the possibility to become a warrior, a magician or a thief and act that way, and see how the adventure unfolds according to your actions and decisions. This is the fun about these games. The Japanese prefer to experience their adventures through a thirdperson perspective, not directly.

When a new console comes on to the market, software for the old one dries up, and the old system finds its place in the closet, where it will be almost forgotten – maybe it will resurface on a rare occasion, but basically it is dead

It is like watching a movie. When the original

Hori has outdone even its *Onimusha 3* katana with its *DQVIII* controller: an accurate, if firmer, rendition of a *DQ* slime

Star Wars was brought into Japanese theatres, the producer at that time, Gary Kurtz, got a very bad impression about the Japanese audience. While in America everybody was shouting when the Death Star exploded at the end of the movie, not a single Japanese spectator said a single word. It is not that the Japanese did not enjoy Star Wars – on the contrary. It is just that the Japanese hate to demonstrate their feelings in front of others, so they don't want to react noisily as the movie unfolds in front of their eyes, or to become one with the character appearing on screen; they prefer to just watch the movie.

Therefore, it was not *Wizardry* or *Ultima* in their Japanese localised versions that taught the shy Japanese players the fun of roleplaying games, but *Dragon Quest*, and in this regard it is correct to say that RPG = *Dorakue*. So, the biggest competitor to the new pieces of hardware from Nintendo and Sony is a piece of software. (Of course, this time, because the game is going to be released on a current console, we will not have to open our closets in search of an old system.) To make things as bad as possible for the two new consoles, the new Square Enix game is going to be sold for a record price tag: ¥8,800 (£45) before tax, which is around ¥2,000 (£10) more extensive than standard PS2 games. So buying this new *Dragon Quest* will leave less money for people to spend on other items.

So *Dorakue VIII* stands clearly as the only winner for the end of this year in Japan. I have to confess that when *Dragon Quest VII* was released in 2000, I had a game of my own being released at the same time: needless to say my game was blown away, like many others that day. That's why this time I'm relieved that we're still a few months away from entering the master process, and not in middle of it – meaning that my game will get a chance this time!



Though *GTA* and *Halo* are learning fast, it's *DQ* that was the original nation-stopper. There's still no confirmation of a western release, but hopes remain high – though storefront campouts are unlikely



Q&A

Photography: Martin Thompson



IOMO

That mobile phone in your pocket might be a very significant gaming device, and Hampshire's IOMO is determined to get you playing. We spoke to the team about the N-Gage, 3D graphics and the unique challenges it faces developing something you play on your phone

When we ran a feature on mobile gaming four years ago, it was an industry with big ideas for a small medium, struggling with the flick-book nature of WAP, 90x30 monochrome handsets and a tangle of publishers, network operators and distributors. Now, downloadable Java titles boast 16bit flair, handsets have evolved to GBA-comparable graphical fidelity and mobile games are aggressively marketed by network operators and traditional gaming publishers alike. We visited Eastleigh-based IOMO, voted Best Mobile Development Studio two years running in the Develop Industry Excellence awards, to discuss the difference those four years have made with managing director John Chasey, creative director Glenn Broadway and development director Niall Fraser.

How have you coped in a technological environment that is developing so fast?

JC: When we started – back in the days of WAP – it was pretty obvious that a few years down the line the technical capability of handsets would catch up with the rest of the console industry pretty quickly. Because the development timeframes are so much shorter, perhaps three to six months, each time you move on to a new project you pick up the new technology as it progresses. It's not a case of working two years on a project, lifting your head up from the desk to look around and finding everything's changed.

GB: The handset fragmentation means you take a different approach anyway. You have to design for a broad range of platforms, screen sizes, input devices – so your game designs are already taking into account these changes. When a new phone comes along with buttons on the other side of the screen, or a joystick, or a trackball, you have a bit of an advantage.

With technical design, I presume we're unconsciously doing the same sort of thing as the best developers back in the 8bit days, the mentality that drove, say, Jeff Minter to find out where the screen memory was on his PET. That's the approach you need to take to get the best out of mobile.

Do the small teams and low overheads safeguard creativity, or does the market you're dealing with prevent you from making more experimental titles?

JC: You can take more risks in mobile development than you can with consoles, and it's because the market is fundamentally different. Everyone talks about PC and console gaming having a 'mass market', but mobile phones are even more massmarket. And from that perspective we tend to distinguish between hardcore gamers, which is basically anyone who plays console games, and then there's the other group of people who game on their mobile phone but may never have played a console game.

GB: A hardcore gamer on consoles is someone who plays six or seven hours a night, but a hardcore gamer for a mobile developer is someone who understands up, down, left, right and fire. So it means being experimental is... experimental in different ways. Experimental on a PS2 is EyeToy, but experimental on mobile is something that you wouldn't even dream of outside of mobile – something involving the camera, or location-based gaming... there's scope to be more experimental just because of the nature of the platform.

How has Nokia been to work with?

NF: [Laughs at the other two's hesitant expressions]

JC: I'm just trying to work out what I'm allowed to say and what I'm not allowed to say. [Laughs]



Niall Fraser, John Chasey and Glenn Broadway of IOMO



The thing to remember is that most handset manufacturers, up until a couple of years ago, weren't platform companies – they never had any thirdparty companies writing content for their devices. All mobile phone companies had to go through a learning curve of supporting their developers, and in effect they're now developing operating systems for their phones. Nokia is one of the better companies in terms of supporting thirdparty developers.

GB: Nokia have always been quite forward-thinking in terms of content: they've always been willing to finance good content for their embedded games, they've had a good history of developing games for download. Obviously, with N-Gage, they're the first ones to even move into that sort of market.

What are your opinions of the N-Gage?

JC: The problems with the original N-Gage have been very well documented, so rather than going over those again I guess you have to applaud Nokia for having the guts to go out there and try... In many ways, Nokia, with the N-Gage, brought mobile gaming to the attention of a much wider audience, brought it into a lot of existing software publishers' minds in a way that wouldn't have happened otherwise.

NF: That's because it's been designed for games. And it has probably the best input devices – the QD joypad is better than any available handset.

GC: Wireless Gaming Review [an American website] always uses an N-Gage QD to review [mobile] games, so it must be doing something right to become their chosen platform.

JC: It's an interesting statistic that people who bought an N-Gage consistently download significant numbers of Java games, in addition to buying the cartridge games. So it goes to show there's definitely an appetite with gamers out there. But with machines like the DS and PSP around the corner, the N-Gage is going to suffer from technical comparison, because it's aimed much more at the hardcore gamer than the massmarket gamer. And Sony and Nintendo have got the hearts and minds of those gamers. It's going to be difficult for the N-Gage to compete long-term.

Do you think it's been a mistake to attempt complex, or 'realistic', 3D on the N-Gage? Or with mobile titles in general?

JC: The issue with the N-Gage was that a lot of the early stuff was ports of PS1 games, and you're then directly compared to the originals and any failures will be highlighted. If you're working on a title specifically for the device, games are then viewed from a more objective viewpoint. With mobile in general, it's quite a nutty issue: 3D is going to be hitting the mobile market in a big way next year. On the surface, with 3D, a lot of games will potentially look more attractive. But navigation within a 3D world is something mobile phones aren't suited to.

GB: And some people argue that 3D games don't work without analogue control, which I sort of agree with, although we did a few











years on PS1 without it. Another thing we need to be really wary of is that console gamers have been led slowly to 3D through wireframe, flat-shaded polygons, a few textures – whereas mobile gamers haven't necessarily experienced it at all, and they may think, 'why is that 3D game meant to

"You almost have to have three or four years' experience before you can pick up a current console title"



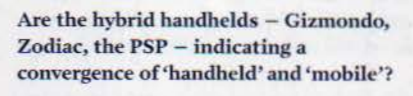
be better than this 2D one, with all its beautiful hand-drawn characters and expressions?'

JC: There's also the argument that some massmarket consumers can be frightened off by a 3D game, and a simple 2D game isn't as threatening. You almost have to have three or four years' experience playing console games before you can pick up a current console title. There are a lot of gamers in the mobile market who don't have that experience, and a 3D game would be incomprehensible to them, just in terms of 'what do I do?'

GB: In the last couple of years of console development you can see the realisation that, while they've been really successful, maybe the market wasn't expanding. And that's why you saw games like EyeToy and *SingStar*, which are clearly not aimed at the same market as *Halo*, or *Half-Life 2*. Mobile's been like that all the time. The kind of people that play *SingStar* are the kind of people that download mobile games. So for 3D... I think there's a good chance we can use the power that 3D offers, but in a 2D environment – sprite rotation, for instance. They're not the best sprite-pushers, phones.



Are the hybrid handhelds – Gizmondo, Zodiac, the PSP – indicating a convergence of 'handheld' and 'mobile'?

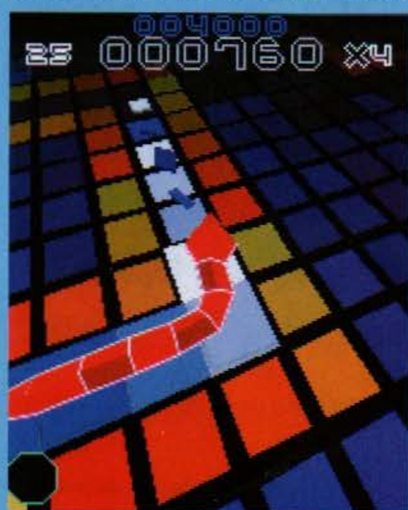


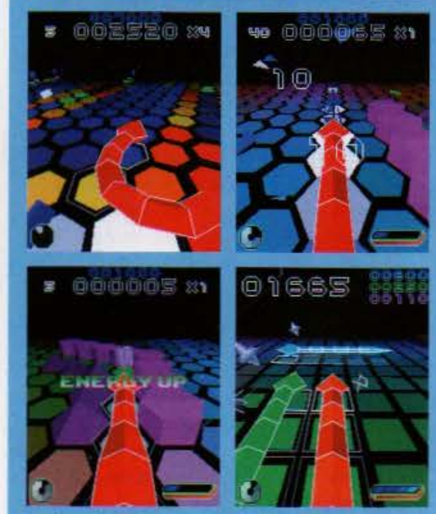
GB: There are already platforms that have undergone this sort of convergence – you can buy a PDA that you can use as a phone, but people don't do it. I know loads of people with BlackBerries, but they only use them for reading their email, and wouldn't dream of making a phone call on it.

SNAKES alive

IOMO's N-Gage version of the original phone (time-)killer application features both an eye-catching abstract 3D overhaul and, for those inured to the core game's sinuous dot-eating charms, fourplayer wireless deathmatch. There's more to the singleplayer than is at first apparent, too, as it gradually introduces speed-up/slowdown tiles, score-multiplying 'power paths', the ability to slip through holes in the level to the flipside, and occasional switches from four-directional square-based grids to six-directional hex honeycombs.

As an update to the game that caused a million missed bus stops, it seems surprising that it's been developed exclusively for the N-Gage – but Chasey points out that had it been developed as Java-based mobile title, only two current handsets could support Bluetooth multiplayer. Additionally, the game's delivery method is one unique to the platform: *SNAKES* is to be 'virally distributable', seemingly Nokia's current favourite soundbite. Initially available as a free download through the N-Gage Arena service, a front-end option allows the game to be sent via Bluetooth to a neighbouring N-Gage. The first iteration of *SNAKES* is aiming for a December debut, with the intention to release superseding versions with new levels (and possibly a level editor) after the initial outbreak.





Deathmatch (right) is surprisingly tense, with speeding snakes (both single- and multiplayer modes feature an afterburner-like boost function) allowing only a moment of indecision before you're hemmed by living walls. Long-time *Snake* players will probably have developed the prescience to survive: otherwise, we recommend always keeping a protective shield or one-shot hyperspace power-up handy

They use their phone for that. Similarly, you buy a handheld to play games, but I don't know of anyone who bought a mobile phone for its suitability for gaming – well, actually, I'm the only person. So I think they're always going to be different.

JC: Then there's the physical size: when you go out for the night, are you going to take your PSP out with you? It's actually become much more socially acceptable to play a game on your mobile phone than on another device.

GB: You wouldn't pull a Game Boy out in a pub.

"Because the mobile market is so much wider, no-one's actually sure what games people want"

JC: Well, you could, but no-one would sit with you.

So how does developing for an audience that doesn't own the hardware specifically to play your games alter the development approach?

JC: In some ways it makes it more flexible. In the traditional gaming market there's the perception that there are certain games that people buy, and so games have to be made along the same lines. Because the mobile market is so much wider, no-one's actually sure what games people want, and the opportunities for niche games are so much bigger.

GB: There's not a lot of data that comes back to us about who buys games, so it's not like we can decide 'oh, a lot of 18-25-year-old males buy our games, let's do more shooters,' because we don't know. But we've been pretty lucky so far.

Do you feel mobile gaming is being taken seriously from a gameplay perspective?

JC: When people play mobile games, they still have the opportunity to be using other forms of entertainment. So for them to choose to play the game instead, they've got to believe it's a worthwhile form of entertainment. Some of the data we've seen – French publisher InFusio did a survey of about 400 gamers, and found most people play mobile phone games at home. That's potentially instead of watching telly or booting up the PC or PlayStation.

GB: Vodafone did a lot to ensure it was taken seriously, getting the likes of Beckham and Schumacher in their TV campaign, and the whole setup of Vodafone Live. And the other operators have followed their lead. So it's certainly being taken seriously by developers, publishers and operators. It's more a case of the public knowing it's there, rather than how they perceive it. The ones that do perceive it come back and buy more games.

What are your predictions for the next few years of mobile gaming?

GB: One of the key areas will be games that are connected via the network – it's a bit prohibitive at the moment with the data charges, but soon there'll be flat fees being introduced. When that happens, mobile games will be like live media, constantly fresh – someone who updates their ringtone or backdrop every week will get involved in games more when they know the games will reflect what they're into.

JC: Multiplayer and 3D will be the two big changes next year, but what's going to be interesting is the range of performance we'll have: some handsets will do 3D in software, and others are going to have Nvidia and ATI hardware acceleration.

NF: The issue with multiplayer is being able to play it across networks. When SMS first came out, you could only message to the same network – it was only when you could do it to anyone that it took off. Multiplayer, and features like ranking, ghost racing and so on will really expand when that happens.

GB: High scores and ghost racing's just the first little toe-dip, though, and I think connected games on mobile are going to be totally different to anything you've seen on Xbox Live. They're going to be about people's desire to collect things, or have content which is fresh every time you turn your phone on.



Pick up the phone

IOMO suggests ten great mobile titles

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow

Gameloft
www.gameloft.com

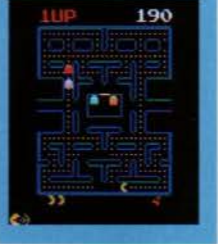
Action games comparable in look and feel to GBA titles are Gameloft's forte, and their Ubisoft licences are some of the best. Such high production values can often come at the price of longevity, but the games are, nonetheless, superb.



Pac-Man

Namco
www.namco.co.uk

"Perhaps your readers might find it ironic," notes Broadway of this familiar inclusion. The same values *Pac-Man* leveraged to such great effect 20 years ago have ensured it a regular place in the mobile download charts top ten.



Playman Sports: Power Games

Mr. Goodliving
www.mrgoodliving.com

The Playman Sports series has built a strong mobile following with clean, attractive presentation hitched to simple-action, addictive gameplay. *Power Games* provides another varied four-event workout for the wave-haired lead.



Pub Pool

IOMO
www.iomo.com

Whether it's the ball physics or the patrons' fine line in disparaging commentary that keeps players coming back to *Pub Pool*, it's been a mobile sleeper hit, leading a franchise of down t'local titles from *Pub Darts* to *Pub Fight*.

2005 Tiger Woods PGA Tour Golf

IOMO/EA
www.iomo.com

IOMO's handset version of the hugely popular franchise teed off on mobile over two years ago: this latest version features a true 3D engine, multiple characters and online features on even the most resolutely low-tech of handsets.

Bluetooth Biplanes

Morpheme
www.morpheme.co.uk

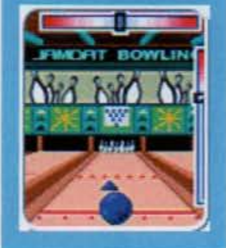
Though few handset owners can currently experience Bluetooth connectivity, Morpheme seized the first possible chance to allow them to dogfight. It's a tentative step towards mobile gaming's next generation of communication- and location-based features.



JAMDAT Bowling

JAMDAT
www.jamdat.com

The original big seller, finding the perfect medium between functionality, simplicity and a strike you can feel in your back teeth. It's perfect for mobile by nature, and though the sequel added online ranking, the original is just as competitive solo.



Mosquitos

Ojom
www.ojom.com

Ojom's 'augmented reality' titles use the handset camera feed as a backdrop and process the input for a sense of motion – but suspend technical analysis and you'll soon be spinning on the spot attempting to protect passers-by from a swarm of bloodsuckers.



NOM

Gamevil
www.gamevil.com/eng/nom

"One button play! Rotate the phones!" Korean developer Gamevil's hero is sprinting to a date with some minimalist destiny, and doesn't stop at the screen's edge – he continues up it, with the player frantically spinning their phone to keep up with his pace.

Tomb Raider: The Osiris Codex

IOMO
www.tombraidermobile.com

Delivered in three episodes, Lara globetrots from Egypt to Tibet to Scotland – fending off enemies and traversing death drops, block puzzles and pit traps in an adventure that outperforms both *Angel Of Darkness* and *Rick Dangerous*.



Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Final Fantasy XII



There was a time when we never wanted to see the words *Final Fantasy* again, but the potential of wiping clean such an elaborate template is impossible to resist.
PS2, SQUARE ENIX

Katamari Damacy Oni



We've been sustaining ourselves with the soundtrack, feeding our hunger with desktop wallpapers. It's not enough to satisfy, however: we need new worlds to consume.
PS2, NAMCO

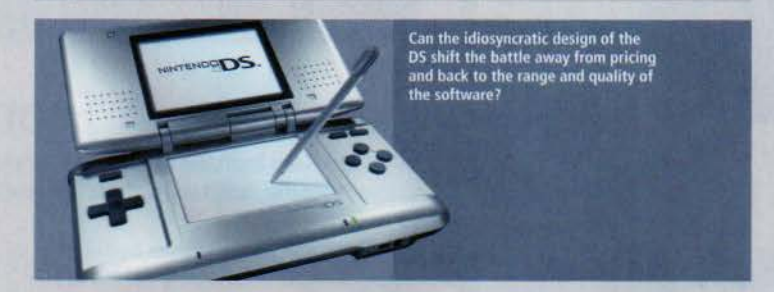
Yoshi's Universal Gravitation



Mawaru: Made In Wario has proven that the tilt technology works, and the idea of it married to Yoshi's delectable sketch-book universe is an entirely irresistible prospect.
GBA, NINTENDO

Winner loses all?

The real casualty of the handheld battle



Can the idiosyncratic design of the DS shift the battle away from pricing and back to the range and quality of the software?

By the time this magazine is in your hands, a Nintendo DS will be in ours. Or perhaps you're not reading this and are playing on your own DS, having taken advantage of the poorly dollar and a lightning-fast courier company. Either way, it's here. From press release to coat pocket in less than a year.

Just as speedy have been the shifts in the power balance between the DS and the PSP. Last month Nintendo had Sony on the ropes. The DS' pricing, the line-up and the timing all seemed perfect. Sony was on the back foot, still prevaricating about battery life, the chance of a Christmas launch slipping through its fingers. And then, that number. ¥20,790. £105. No-one, least of all Nintendo, was braced for something that aggressive. Rumours had been circulating that the price would be nearly double that, ¥38,000 (£195) or thereabouts. The higher number certainly seemed more plausible, once you start to add up the price of the PSP's components.

And so the speculation merely shifts. Now it's not 'what's it going to cost me', it's 'what's it going to cost Sony'. Some commentators have suggested Sony could be losing as much as £200 per unit. Assuming licensing costs are similar for PSP games as for PS2, Sony would then need to convince each new PSP owner to shell out for more than 20 games before it makes its money back.

And where does that leave Nintendo? For the second time in as many launches, it's been undercut by a manufacturer which prizes profile over profit. The GameCube was one of the most sensible propositions gaming has ever seen. Purely for games, cheap to make, profitable to sell, its price clearly differentiated it from the competition. And then Microsoft slashed the Xbox, and Nintendo's hardware couldn't compete. The DS was the same plan, boxed differently. But with a slender £20 separating the Japanese prices, it's hard to know if its inventiveness will sustain it against the superior specs and looks of the PSP.

Competition is supposed to be healthy. However, the impact of the fight for market share – Microsoft going after the all-conquering PS2, and Sony going after Nintendo's handheld crown – has been to drive hardware profitability out of the industry. Does that really make them winners?



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **WINTER 2004**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138**



Shadow Of Rome

In which Keiji Inafune gives us a school textbook on ancient Rome, with added aerial cruelty to animals



Typically, Capcom games deal with subjects as variously grounded in realism as persistent zombies (*Resident Evil*), haunted hotels (*Gregory Horror Show*) and medieval boxer shorts (*Maximo*). Even when they touch on the historical – *Onimusha*, for example – it's a resolutely mythical take. But *Shadow Of Rome* is different: it's a dramatic reconstruction of events in ancient Rome, asking questions about who killed Caesar, sending the player on a mission to free their framed father and for once promising fact over fiction.

That's the main reason that **Keiji Inafune**, the *Onimusha* creator who's leading this project, claims it's not that *Shadow Of Rome* is different from Capcom games, it's that it's different from games full stop: "Well, rather than saying this is different from Capcom's other games, probably this game is different from all the others. There are a lot of games that take a historical backdrop, but this one is widely based on fact. You can learn history at the same time. With regards to the references, the team came over to Europe, visited ruins, read books, saw Gladiator..."

Gladiator. Okay, so perhaps the game's not entirely factual, then, but there aren't any Argonaut-style skeletons rising from the ground, and that alone is a serious concession when it comes to Capcom's vivid imagination. *Shadow Of Rome* is split into two sections, the stealthy adventure-game inquiries of Octavius, and the substantially less subtle gladiatorial conflicts of his friend Agrippa. This is where the influence of Gladiator comes to the fore, severed limbs and all. It's a bloody game, and another departure for Capcom.

"Obviously we don't expect children to play the game, but having said that, it's based on fact. This actually happened. Some of it is maybe exaggerated a little bit for the game, but this is what happened, actually, and people have to acknowledge it." Torsos cleaved in two, knives thrust straight through prone enemies, and this: "AERIAL CRUELTY



Arenas aren't static playgrounds, but filled with tricks and toys that prove as deadly as they are useful. Some must be activated to progress; others are merely bloody

"It's based on fact. This actually happened. Some of it is exaggerated a little bit for the game, but this is what happened, actually, and people have to acknowledge it"



Meat Sculptor: The bloodier Agrippa's actions, the more respect (in the form of Salvos, visible in the bottom right of the screen) he'll get from the crowd. You can invent your own combos for better scores





Stealthy, dishy Octavius has no direct combat skills, but can eliminate guards with nearby objects, guile and (conceivably) his boyish good looks. This may not work on tigers, however





Agrippa's violent endeavours in the arena aren't just for the crowd's sadistic entertainment, of course. The overall winner of the tournament will get the opportunity to execute Agrippa's father – and if Agrippa wins, he can spare him







Down an enemy and Agrippa will follow with a celebratory finishing move. If your opponent's not quite dead, it's easy enough to stick a knife through him to make sure

TO ANIMALS!" The object in the gladiatorial sections isn't just to win the fight, but to entertain, and each particularly entertaining move is rewarded with an absurd on-screen combo shout and a rise in appreciation from the onlookers. Aerial Cruelty To Animals is the *Tony Hawk*-style flash when you down an eagle with a rock; combat in Capcom's coliseums doesn't just take place between humans, and Agrippa must also fight elephants and tigers on his way through the game.

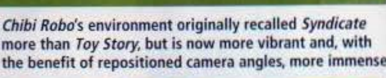
The other obligatory part of the game ("It's divided by chapters, so you have to clear all of them. Having said that, there are lots of variations within the same chapter, so the second time through the game you'll encounter different situations," explains Inafune) are the sneaky, *Metal Gear*-esque sections with Octavius. Our concerns that the two gameplay types won't mesh are dismissed by Inafune: "Though at a glance the games are so different, actually there are the same sort of operational things going on. Even with sneaking, you have to use the same methods to kill things and advance through the stages. And within the arena you have to look around to grasp the situation and please the crowd. Killing someone is not the main aim."

The point is that the puzzle-solving sections aren't ornamental, or some pointless concession to vogue stealth gaming. Despite the arena sections, which are as resolutely arcade-oriented as anything Capcom has ever released, *Shadow Of Rome* is a narrative-driven experience. And it's very difficult to tell a story within the confines of a dynamic that's just dramatic, over-the-top death after death. "Stealth play was something we needed to drive the story forward," confirms Inafune. "However, you've got some sort of main purpose – in this case you've got to find out who killed Caesar and save Agrippa's father. If you're just going to think, 'Oh, yes, stealth is vogue,' and throw in this and throw in that without thinking about the game, players will feel frustration."

There's always that risk with this kind of dynamic, and we're not entirely convinced the mesh of genres won't just end up frustrating fans of one type of game or the other. The positive way of looking at it, of course, is that there's bound to be something for everyone to enjoy here. So let's be positive, because, after all, it's very difficult to be negative about a game that offers aerial cruelty to animals.



You enter the Sanderson family household as a birthday gift, but your novelty factor seems to wear off quickly – isn't it always the way with high-tech goods? – leaving you to work your way into their hearts



Chibi Robo's environment originally recalled *Syndicate* more than *Toy Story*, but is now more vibrant and, with the benefit of repositioned camera angles, more immense



FORMAT: **GC**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **SKIP**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBC**

Chibi Robo

Skip puts the spring back into spring-cleaning with its reconditioned little helper





Your fellow serving robots range from a perpetually confused-looking cubist helicopter (right) to considerably more jumbo-sized models (above). It seems there's a pecking order, perhaps allowing you to call on the services of robots beneath your station

It really is the Little Robot That Could: after appearing over a year ago on Bandai's label then vanishing almost as abruptly, *Chibi Robo* has been rescued from the scrapheap by Nintendo itself, and its eccentric inventor given another chance to make good. The game's troubled development, rebirth and rescue are almost par for the course where Skip's director Kenichi Nishi is concerned. His exhilaratingly manic-depressive weblog has charted the lows of his despair over 'communication RPG' *Giftpia*'s underperformance and *Chibi Robo*'s lack of focus to the highs of his excitement over developing for the DS – even pre-empting Nintendo's official announcement, resulting in a hasty update pretending he had lied.

The DS game aside, *Chibi Robo*'s second incarnation leaves its ten-centimetre stainless-steel hero unchanged, but revises his diminutive role in the world. Originally tasked to free his masters from a pair of burglars who had broken into the family home, the redesigned game returns the domestic situation to normal (or at least as normal as the gloriously gaudy environments allow, apparently having received a spring-clean of their own since the sterile originals). If *Pikmin* was a paean to gardening, this is Skip's guide to good housekeeping, it being your task to mend, clean, find lost objects and attend to your family and their pets in an effort to become the house's best robot. It's unclear from what we've seen so far how your fellow menial machines will take to your overachieving, but healthy competition can probably be expected.

Your human masters go about their daily lack of chores in realtime, with a day-to-night cycle determining their locations and actions: a more pressing time consideration, though, is your robot's battery life. Constantly winding down as he travels, any more strenuous activities, such as springing helicopter blades or a variety of other context-sensitive tools, require an extra energy outlay. The plug he trails can be inserted into a wall socket to recharge, or alternately allow him to become a walking battery and transfer power into an idle appliance to gain its beneficial effects. Power points are dotted around the initial areas with sympathetic regularity, suggesting that even if the original design's game-ending penalty for running dry has carried over, it won't prove to be too oppressively unfair a feature.

Nintendo's endorsement, and possibly design guidance, seems to have given *Chibi Robo* the spark even its creator had felt was missing: despite its mechanical subject matter, it's now vibrantly alive – and the tinkering and tuning until its yet-to-be-announced release date can only amplify that sensation.



In addition to standard rapid-hit combos, it's possible to chain fatal strikes, allowing you to hack down an angry mob at speed before they've so much as cocked a trigger



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SPIKE**
DEVELOPER: **ACQUIRE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **WINTER 2005**

Samurai Western

The Way Of The Samurai meets The Way Of The Gun as Acquire goes Red Dead Katana

Acquire is a small developer with a big name, having created the *Tenchu* ninja series before moving on to another romanticised feudal ideal with *Way Of The Samurai*. The first two instalments proved popular in Japan, and gained some cult success in the west for their relatively freeform play (if not quite living up to their positioning as the eastern answer to *GTAIII*). But for this third title Acquire and long-time publisher Spike are attempting a new spin to court western success. As with Sega's latest *Sakurai Taisen* game, the idea of western appeal has been taken literally, and perhaps mistakenly, to mean wild western – with a change of setting from 19th century Japan to the American frontier.

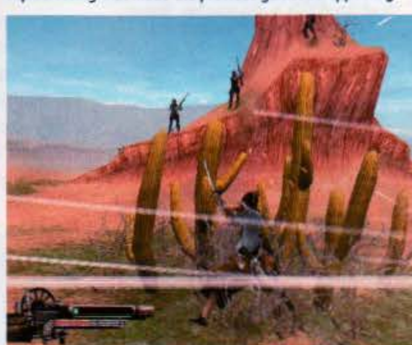
Also left to the Edo period are the free-roaming adventure elements, with *Samurai Western* focusing on action: not the careful duels of previous games, but the less artful clash between swordsman and gunslinger. The hero, honour-bound to fight only with a katana, must overcome gangs of less sporting enemies armed with pistols, shotguns and machine guns. As well as the historically verifiable technique of diving for cover, various special moves can be used to even the odds: the Hajiki method allows the samurai to deflect incoming bullets with his blade or, with practice, even send them back at his assailants. The Kawashi technique can be used to dash out of the path of an otherwise fatal bullet, and if triggered with perfect timing provides an opportunity to close the distance to the attacker before he can readjust his aim.

Other moves, such as mortal strikes, can be acquired through gaining levels or finding new blades, suggesting that both the simple character growth and weapon-collecting aspects of previous *WOTS* titles have survived the journey intact. An element hopefully left behind will be the weak camera, as *Samurai Western*'s action makeover includes a potentially disastrous new focus on platforming elements – from rooftop duels to an inevitable wagon-to-wagon train-jumping sequence. While the game world has been greatly expanded to take in this variation, it's now strictly a stage-by-stage progression, with only the occasional unlockable side-level to be found off the scripted path.



Collectible swords will include pairs, but the arcade focus of *Samurai Western* may mean there's little marked difference in mechanics between one-handed and two sword techniques

Protagonist Kiryu Gojiro has come to America in search of his lost brother: a suitably one-track setup for a spaghetti western, but perhaps not for the Rashomon-style triplecrossing that made the previous games so appealing





The shot-reflecting technique looks to come in for heavy use, with distant riflemen requiring accurate return fire (top right). Hopefully the ricochet sound effects will be given the full Leone treatment

Despite the starry-eyed enthusiasm the developer and publisher show for the project (voice acting has already been recorded in Los Angeles, we're reverentially informed), there's the niggling doubt that perhaps the features most likely to appeal to western audiences are those that have been discarded. Shorn of its branching plot, warring families and freedom to make your own ending, all the game has left is its admittedly appealing style – but the thirdperson slasher is a market both overcrowded and shrinking.

Tellingly, Spike and Acquire have avoided presenting the game as the 'true' *WOTS3*, stating such a game would be set in familiar territory – something that may be more palatable to western fans who are not necessarily fans of westerns.


In addition to saving your health (and that all-important ranking), the last minute dash can be used to speed across open ground to the next patch of cover

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **DEEP SHADOWS**
ORIGIN: **UKRAINE**
RELEASE: **2005**

Boiling Point: Road To Hell

This jungle-based shooter from the Ukraine is ambitious, but will Deep Shadows' game prove to be a cry too far?





Missions for different factions require different tactics and a variety of guns. Hunting wildlife is also possible, though more for sport than for practical use

A complex, non-linear shooting-oriented adventure, *Boiling Point*'s ambition can't be faulted. Encompassing every inch of a mythical South American locale ruled by a variety of colourful, clichéd factions, its physical scale is impressive enough. That your character – an against-the-odds mercenary looking for his missing daughter – can take on missions for any of those factions and more besides, balancing some delicately interlocking relationships in his personal quest makes it even more so. It's a big, big game, not your traditional winding-corridor firstperson shooter, offering shades of *Deus Ex* and maybe even *Grand Theft Auto*. But while talk from the developer is bullish, ambition may not be enough.

For a start, it's a physically unattractive game, something that's undoubtedly going to count against it in the fascistic graphics-oriented world of PC gaming. Presumably that's part of a compromise between the size of the world and its beauty; it'd be a very sparse forest indeed if every tree was rendered to, say, *Far Cry* levels of majesty. Regardless, the visuals do the concept no favours. Equally, the game's combat looks random and fiddly, and irritating in that brutal, deadly manner that has become common to modern PC firstperson shooters. For a game based predominantly around point'n'click combat, that may prove an issue.

Still, there is a lot here for Atari to be proud of, and our view of the game in action hardly lasted long enough to make a perfect judgement call. Hopefully, the developer will be able to pull it off; as there's nothing wrong with the design except for perhaps a lack of restraint. The problem with trying to do so much is that often you end up falling short on each and every goal, and it looks like Deep Shadows has some polishing to do before its product matches the spectacular vision.





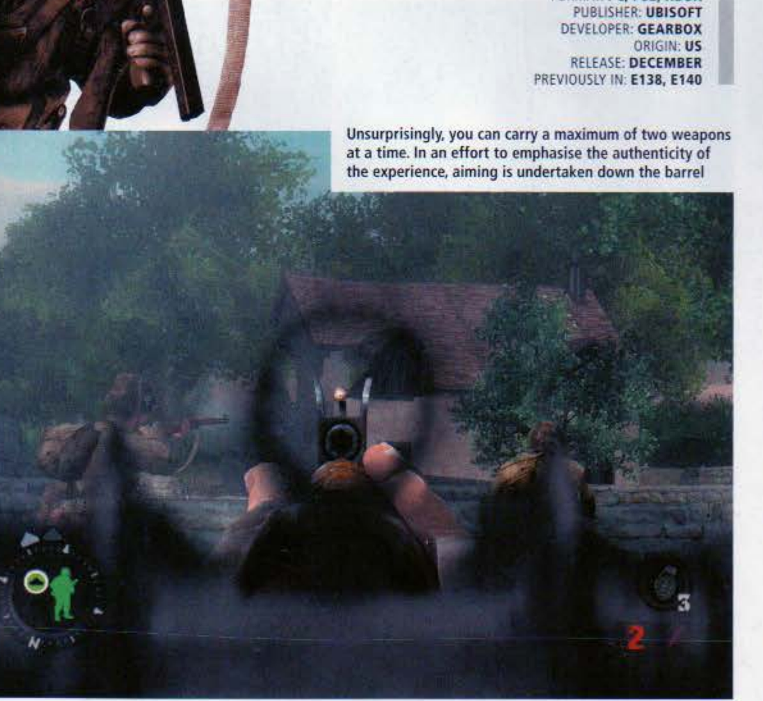
Communication with NPCs plays out in *Monkey Island* style conversation trees. Talking to characters will get you new missions; it may also get you a girlfriend

Brothers In Arms

Gearbox obeys the clipped tones of the sergeant-major with a realistic WWII shooter that follows all the rules

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **GEARBOX**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **DECEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138, E140**

Unsurprisingly, you can carry a maximum of two weapons at a time. In an effort to emphasise the authenticity of the experience, aiming is undertaken down the barrel



There's a reason *Call Of Duty* offers such a mish-mash of settings and scenarios, taking you through missions alongside eccentric English officers in prison camps and across beaches side by side with Russian footsoldiers, and it is this: playing it by the book can be boring; far better to throw it out of the window and make up your own rules as you go along. With *Brothers In Arms*, however, Gearbox (the American developer behind the PC conversion of *Halo)* disagrees, preferring to pay its respects both to historical events and the specific nature of WWII combat.

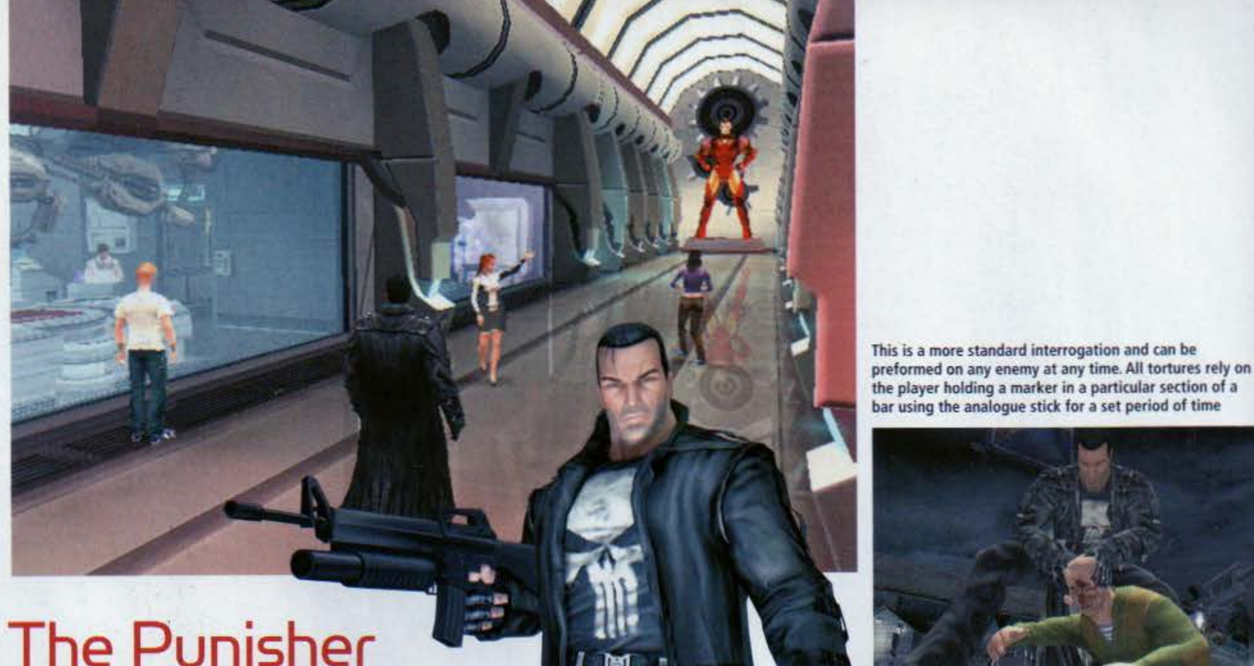
This means, for example, an absence of levels in which you get to drive a tank while simultaneously firing upon foes like some super-scaled version of *Combat*. In *Brothers In Arms* you are the sergeant of a 12-man squad working through the American invasion of Normandy in accordance with what actually happened in 1944.

Thus, the action has a distinct Band Of Brothers flavour, with verbal exchanges between your men lending atmosphere to the storyline. The key here, though, is authenticity of combat: working as a group of three and carefully commanding those around you is how it was done in real life, so that's how it works out in the game.

Squad-based shooters from Ubisoft are hardly anything new, but the attention to detail here elevates it above the likes of the *Rainbow Six* series and into the realm of serious unit management. The events on which it's based are legendary, which bodes well for a gripping title.



The HUD has been designed in order to be as unobtrusive as possible, and it's possible to switch off the icons that help ease you into the action when you're starting out



FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **VOLITION**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY**

The Punisher

It's the bloodiest, most violent game ever conceived. So why doesn't it shock?

The first time you ram a pleading, squealing criminal feet first into a wood chipper and watch the resultant human mulch spurt into a waiting van, you'll probably be a little shocked. The second time, the comic book styling and analogue controls will have you smiling as you slide him to his doom. The third, you start to pay more attention to extracting the most from your victim by judicious use of the analogue stick, and by the fourth you'll be blind to the digital pain and suffering.

Make no mistake; despite its scenes of carnage, *The Punisher* is basically a very simple thirdperson action title. You run, you gun, you run some more and then you torture some wrong-doer, ostensibly for information, but ultimately just for kicks. Allowing the auto-aim to lock on to then while strafing can dispatch most enemies, although there is a precision manual aim available for picking off the better hidden. You can also defend yourself from attacks by taking any enemy as a human shield. It all works reasonably well and feels chunky and rewarding to begin with, although aiming can be hard, with the sticks too sensitive for fast, smooth headshots.



This is the scene of the most publicised torture machine, the wood chipper. Taking enemies with skull icons floating above their heads to skull icons in the environment allows the special interrogation to take place, with gruesome results

You also have the option to torture any enemy you come across for both information and a boost in health, should your interrogation be successful. There's a choice of techniques available, with various beatings and the charmingly-titled Gun Tension available at any time, along with the speciality tortures at pre-determined points in the levels. These are inventive – heads in deep fat fryers, goring by rhino, cremation, a blow torch to the face and American History X-style jaw splitting – and for the most part darkly amusing. Still, for all the developer's moral high ground (see Sick filth), there is no chance for clemency. You are given the option of releasing your victims after a successful torture session, but if you do they will run to the next available weapon and start shooting. This is a comic book and the bad guys are just that. Bad. There's no moral grey area here, so you're never made to feel like anything other than a dark hero.

As a comic book conversion this is unusually successful. Expect to see cameos from Iron Man and Black Widow, and with a story written by the current writers of the comic there's no doubting the determination to make this an accurate adaptation.

While the simple, no-nonsense carnage is enjoyable for a while, it remains to be seen if the draw of ever-more-elaborate deaths is enough to maintain interest after the strange thrill of torture on demand wears thin.

This is a more standard interrogation and can be preformed on any enemy at any time. All tortures rely on the player holding a marker in a particular section of a bar using the analogue stick for a set period of time

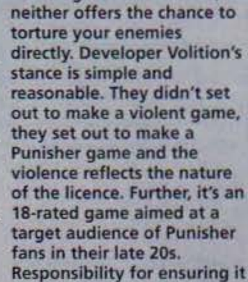




You can take any enemy hostage and use them as a human shield. While in some cases this will stop the other enemies from firing, usually they will just plug away at their comrades until they're dead and must be discarded



Black Widow is one of several characters that will fight alongside you at various points in the game. While allies aren't stunningly intelligent, they react to your actions, shooting enemies you've thrown while they're in the air



Sick filth

In the current ethical climate, *The Punisher* could be seen as either very brave or desperately inappropriate. Despite the moral crusaders' popular scapegoats *GTA* and *Manhunt* featuring a great deal of gruesome murder, neither offers the chance to torture your enemies directly. Developer Volition's stance is simple and reasonable. They didn't set out to make a violent game, they set out to make a Punisher game and the violence reflects the nature of the licence. Further, it's an 18-rated game aimed at a target audience of Punisher fans in their late 20s. Responsibility for ensuring it ends up only in the hands of those people remains with the publishers, the retailers and, ultimately, parents.

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **CAVIA**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2005**

Steamboy

The Akira creator's hymn to Victoriana begets an action adventure replete with bells and whistles



The Steam Ball can be upgraded by collecting gears, which add new abilities or increase its steam capacity – which you'll be thankful of when holding off 19th century war machines

Katsuhiro Otomo's latest film spectacular, Steamboy describes a Victorian steampunk history in the same intimate detail and thunderous bombast as Akira did its cyberpunk Japanese future. Bandai has wasted no time pouncing on the licence – the PS2 version is likely to beat the western theatrical release – with the high-profile development honours going to Cavia, creator of *Drakengard* and *Ghost In The Shell: Stand Alone Complex*.

The game picks up from the second half of the plot, with young Mancunian James Ray Steam beginning his ascent of the Steam Tower, a massive flying fortress, to a final confrontation at its summit – which will feature a divergent ending from the film's. Progressing through the hazardous engine halls of the tower requires the use of Steam's pressurised Steam Ball, the deus ex machina of the piece. It can be used to blast enemies or objects aside, thaw frozen machinery, provide a hydraulic-assisted double jump and can even be ridden – the entire fifth stage of the game is touted as a high-speed flight sequence. Using any of the Steam Ball's actions drains its pressure, so water sources must be located to keep it on the boil.



The initial released screens seem to use the PS2's entire yearly quota of bronze and pillarbox red, but hopefully the film's breathtaking open-air scenes will feature later

Crisp cel-shading seems to have captured the essence of the material well, although whether the engine is up to replicating the intricate mechanical design is another matter. Visuals have never been Cavia's weak point, more concerning is how the signal-to-noise of their fantastic design but occasionally inconsistent implementation will play out. At least Steam's adventure should be anything but assembly-line.

Baten Kaitos: Eternal Wings And The Lost Ocean

If Baten Kaitos were real, then Clinton's would be the most dangerous place in the world

FORMAT: **GC**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **MONOLITH SOFT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)**





Levelling up isn't automatic. Once you've amassed enough experience you'll need to teleport to a mysterious cathedral and politely ask the priest to upgrade you

It's hard to talk about card battle games without talking *about* card battle games. To many gamers they seem like an exercise in completing a pointless circuit: videogames borrowing back the flimsy bits of paper which were the only way the real world could represent the spectacular attacks and characters which card games had borrowed from videogames in the first place. To others, they're gaming at its purest – the twin disciplines of collecting and strategising distilled into something tangible. Whatever your viewpoint, *Baten Kaitos* looks likely to surprise you.

The first surprise is that, for a card-battle RPG, *Baten's* fights are fast-paced and spectacular – particularly when compared to the disappointments of *Phantasy Star Online's* card-based incarnation. Attacks, defence moves and items are all confined to cards, and you'll need to string together combos on a basis of instinct, fast fingers and careful observation of your enemy's weaknesses. And it's not just in battle that the cards are crucial – as you travel through the game your entire inventory is represented by them, and you'll need to use blank cards to absorb elements and items you find along your way.





Elemental strengths and weaknesses are at the core of the game's strategic challenge, but they also form the cornerstone of its spectacular visuals. A single card can erupt in a fountain of light and death, and can help you extend a combo attack

The story is also surprising, although GameCube owners have been spoiled with lavish worlds and engaging tales over the last few months. Grumpy hero Kalas brings a refreshingly unsentimental approach instead of the mawkish morals common to many RPGs. He'll methodically set about plundering the corpses of fallen travellers while their companion stands sobbing over the bodies of her dead friends. Also surprising is the first moment he turns to camera and talks to you direct. For once you, as the player, have a real place in the world, and your text-based conversations with Kalas will be detected as supernatural whispers on the wind from other NPCs.

No UK release is confirmed, but a warm reception in the US might convince Namco to bring the game to Europe.



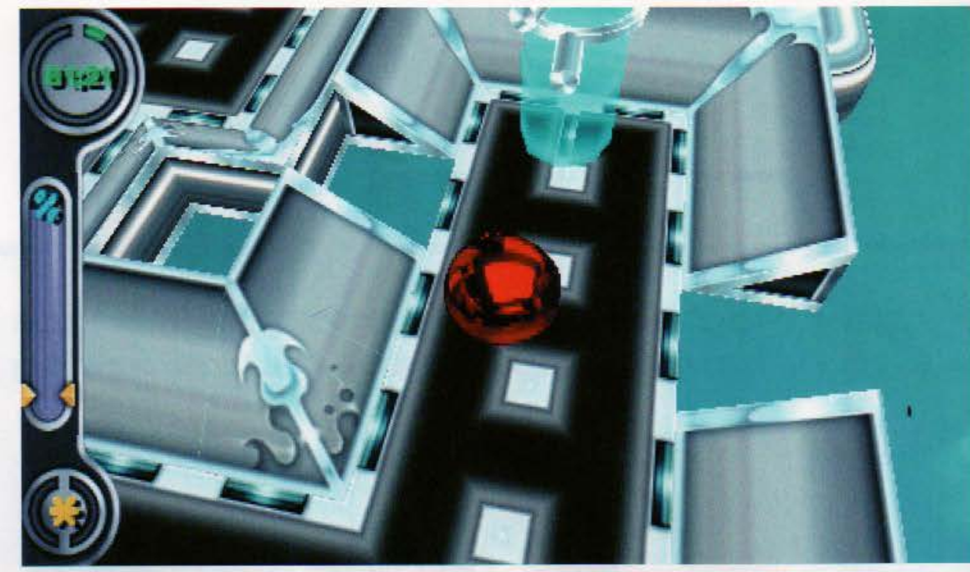
TITLE: **ARCHER MACLEAN'S MERCURY**
FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **IGNITION ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **AWESOME STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2005**



Liquid Launch

Archer Maclean's Awesome Studios has given us something we've never seen before: a fully-working game on the PSP

There are a few rules of interview etiquette that you should never break, and one is never kick off the conversation by enthusing about someone else's game. Sometimes the urge is hard to resist, however, and we are so keen to talk motion sensing with the man behind *Archer Maclean's Mercury* that we immediately pull out Nintendo's new twist on twisting, *Mawaru: Made In Wario* (reviewed on page 90). **Archer Maclean**, the creative director of Awesome Studios, doesn't waste any time. A few minigames, a few chuckles, and then it's on to the interrogation: "Does it use any of the buttons? How many games are there? Does it really only sense lateral movement? Why have they done that? Our one senses the full range. Is it the same technology as they used in *Tilt'n'Tumble*? Where is that, anyway?" And then there's a flurry as he digs through the stacks of papers on his desk until Kirby's cart is unearthed. He holds both to the light, scrutinising. The interview is entirely forgotten, as a new set of game possibilities is digested, deconstructed and catalogued in Maclean's mental library, ready for future reference.



As you progress, walls disappear and safe gentle slopes give way to daredevil drops. You might finish with just enough mercury intact on your first time through, but the lure of 100 per cent guarantees replays

It's clear that any electronic curio would provoke a similar response, but Maclean has a special reason to be interested in *Mawaru*. *Mercury* will debut on PSP before making the leap to home consoles later in 2005, but the intention is to support all versions with a tilt-sensitive adaptor. It's an ambitious plan, but one which fits perfectly with the tactile, shimmery, slithery nature of the game's hero. 'Hero' may not the right word, perhaps, but there's no doubting the allure of the splotch of gleaming metal. (Is splotch the correct term? There's a hesitant silence. "The blob?" Maclean ventures.) The goal of the game is to guide the blob as it ebbs, flows and splits round tilting 3D mazes – sometimes against the clock, sometimes solving puzzles, sometimes simply trying not to spill too much. Some of the liquid metal is coloured – flow a blue blob into a red blob and you'll get purple. And while purple may open a purple switch, it won't trigger a red one or a blue one.

Other hazards are also plentiful – spinning blades, lightning rods or viciously cambered bridges. Any doctor will tell you that extended exposure to mercury can result in clammy hands, excessive perspiration and twitching eyelids. It seems likely that this game will be just as potent as its namesake.

Later levels are large and elaborate, but an initial camera fly-by, as well as manual zoom functions, should ensure you don't get lost





It's the kind of deliciously infuriating game where the control scheme has to be nanometrically perfect. Although all versions will be fully playable with an analogue thumb stick, this is where the tilt control comes into its own. Maclean and his team at Awesome have developed a proprietary tilt technology which they hope to bundle as a PSP peripheral when the game debuts. For the later home console versions, the tilt technology could be built in to a thirdparty controller. For now, the tilt device looks a little clumsy, taped on to the PSP dev kit which itself is tied to a PC by a fat umbilical of wires and cables. There's nothing clumsy, however, about its performance. Precise and sensitive, it makes an already intuitive game utterly instinctive. The PSP's gleaming screen becomes a window into a luminous world, something you peer into instead of looking at, something that has depth you can feel as well as see. It's hard to mask our disappointment when it's time to hand the dev kit back and troop back upstairs for more talking.

The intention is to have *Archer Maclean's Mercury* ready as a UK launch title for the PSP, but the game's genesis dates back much further. "Do

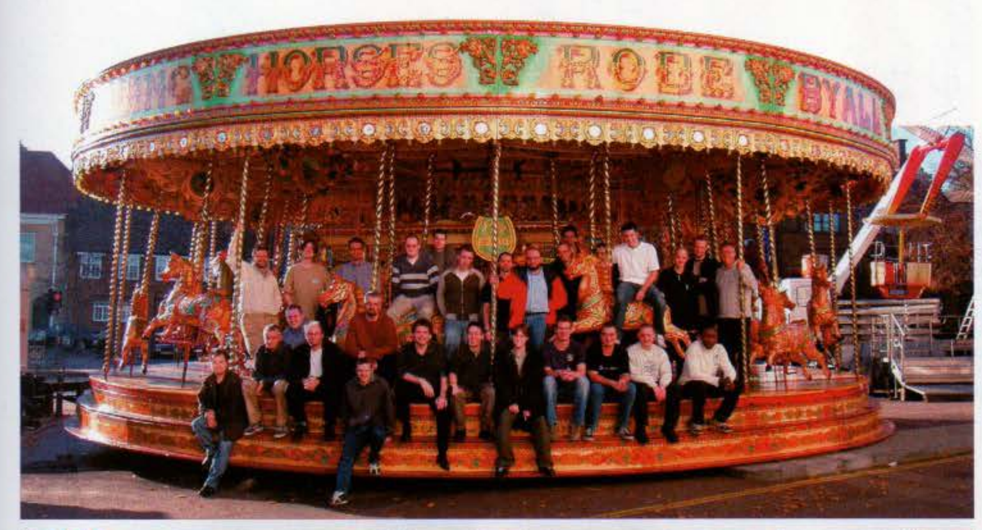


you remember when you were a kid you used to play with those little puzzles from Christmas crackers?" reminisces Maclean. "A little pink thing with four ball bearings in it? Even now when a kid gets something like that – one came free with my Honey Loops last month, just put a droplet of water in and guide it around – it's still brilliant. So, one of the things we did with *Jimmy White's Cueball World* in 2001 was these bizarre subgames, and one of those was a ball in a maze. Four start points, four balls and four goals. And reviewers wrote more about that than about the main game. So about three years ago I was thinking how could I take that idea and turn it into something a bit more high-tech – because ball-in-a-maze isn't going to sell as a main game. And I thought of a liquid metal, like mercury."

But someone who's as inveterate a tinkerer as Maclean doesn't just think about mercury. "I went and bought a giant bottle, about a pint," he confesses. "I can't keep it in the office for health and safety reasons. When I was a kid – a couple of centuries ago – we had bucketfuls of the stuff in the science lab and we'd play with it. I remember pulling handfuls out, dribbling it through my fingers, throwing it at my mates, seeing how it



To keep the learning curve smooth, important features like this colour coded switch are introduced gradually throughout the game









Awesome Studios is located in central Banbury (where there isn't *always* a fair in town). The whole studio is working on *Mercury*, either finalising the PSP game or preparing for next year's console versions. Converted from a bank, there's room upstairs for Jimmy White's old snooker table. Downstairs there's a vault, where Maclean keeps a few choice cabs picked from his vast collection of arcade machines

"The problem with real mercury is that it splits infinitesimally - into atomic sized pieces, and we had to have a minimum size"





Mercury's complexity lies in the devices which litter the levels. Shown here at an earlier stage in the game's development, the see-saw bridge requires you to spill some of your mercury into the bucket, tipping the bridge down so you can cross. The physics of the grav bender, which sticks your blob to the ceiling, has strange side-effects, like this donut, which surprised even the designers

splattered on walls. Now of course, the nanny state says everything's poisonous, even the air. So it's completely illegal to buy it, which meant I had to find a way around it. So all I did was Google 'antique barometer repairers' and I found one nearby. Then all I had to do was wander round there and convinced them I wasn't completely mad."

And that was only the first challenge. The team soon realised that there wasn't much design potential in emulating the real thing. "The problem with real mercury is that it splits infinitesimally - into atomic sized pieces, and we had to have a minimum size, a sixteenth of a blob," explains Maclean. "And then we had to do R&D on how to do the mesh for the skin of the blob, how to manage it at different resolutions depending on how close in you were to it, how to put two blobs side by side and gradually merge them into one bigger bean shaped blob, and then when does it split and how does it split? All of that was incredibly difficult. The maths goes up exponentially depending on how many blobs are touching each other. If there are 16 blobs all moving around, it's a nightmare. But with future consoles, maths-wise, they'll have phenomenal power, and that means in future versions the game won't be



If you accidentally mix the colours of your mercury you'll need to find a colour changer, which will convert your blob to its own hue

limited to one blob. We can have whole sinkfuls of the stuff. We've not finalised anything yet, but we're not short of ideas, let's put it that way."

So why the PSP? Was the concept something Maclean had always envisaged as a handheld game? "Not really," he says. "It started life as a PC tech demo, but we knew there wasn't the market for puzzle games on the PC. So we started work on a console version, and that's what we took to show Sony. This was back in November 2002, before the PSP was known about. But suddenly this machine came along – a cute little handheld console which could run our cute little game. It wasn't that we went to Sony and said we want to do this on the PSP, it wasn't that they came to us and asked for a PSP game. We were just in the right place at the right time. It's a perfect marriage, love at first sight."

So what does he make of the PSP? Is there anything about it which frustrates him? He laughs. "The fact that I can't go out and buy one tomorrow? That frustrates me. And of course there are still a lot of unknowns, but Sony is updating us very fast, every four days or so we get updates. Oh, and I personally wish it had the thumbstick a little bigger."

It's been an odd month for the PSP in Japan, losing the limelight to the DS only to reclaim it with the news of the amazingly aggressive price. Is he pleased? "I'm surprised and delighted. It can only increase demand for the PSP. I think Sony have been up against the problem of the relatively short time they've taken to go from first announcements to actually delivering a final machine. It's almost as if the

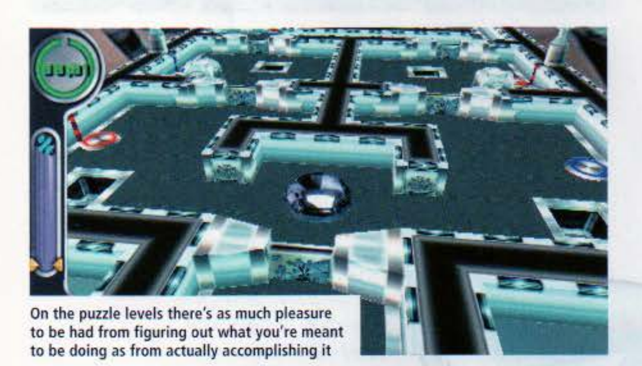


The level select hub world uses portals and symbols rather than text in an effort to make the game as easy to localise as possible



The man with the golden cue

Archer Maclean is one of those names that every gamer knows without necessarily knowing why. Some know exactly why, remembering with intense affection his very first game, *Dropzone* (1984), which appeared on Atari and Commodore machines as well as in the arcades. For others, his name will always be synonymous with *IK+* (1988), a beautifully balanced threeplayer fighter. Since then, his name – and that of Jimmy White – has been emblazoned on a series of pool and snooker games, starting with *Jimmy White's Snooker* in 1991. Most recently he released *Pool Paradise*, a tropical getaway which let you while away the hours with straight pool, novelty star-shaped tables and the most satisfying analogue darts game ever made. This will make a return as *Pool Paradise International* next year, complete with Xbox Live play. In 2002 Awesome Studios became part of Ignition Entertainment, which Maclean oversees alongside founders Vijay Chadha and Greg Bavertsock. As that rarest of UK breeds – the developer/publisher – Ignition has recently signed a deal with SNK to publish their titles in Europe, bringing *Metal Slug* and *King of Fighters* to a fanbase previously forced to import.



On the puzzle levels there's as much pleasure to be had from figuring out what you're meant to be doing as from actually accomplishing it

much bigger development issues are running ahead of the PR machine. And they have had significant leading-edge technological issues to conquer."

The real potential of the machine is still a cause for speculation. How hard is *Mercury* pushing it? "I think fairly hard. The game might look simple – you think, 'Oh, it's just a maze with a bit of liquid in it' – but when you actually look at the maths going on between the physics of the blob, how it splits and globs together, and then the 3D levels with all the texturing and lighting and dynamic shadows and suddenly technically it looks like quite a challenge. But it runs fairly fast, well, flat out at the moment, although you're not too worried about frames per second on a handheld screen."

Those 3D levels also present the biggest technical challenge for the team – the camera. Intricate, multi-layered levels do not lend themselves well to fixed camera points. Programming an automatic camera for a game where the central character (it may be a faceless ball of liquid metal, but it's almost impossible not to anthropomorphise as you coax it round corners and agonise over orphaned droplets) can split into 16 pieces and run off in 16 different directions is basically impossible. How can the camera predict which one you want it to follow? The likely solution is a halfway house – a semi-automatic system which can be smoothly overridden by the player. Tilt control should leave plenty of buttons free for an intuitive system, and the console versions will work very happily with a twin stick system.

Also crucial in the few development days remaining will be the difficulty balancing. The game will offer multiple routes through to completion, there are currently 108 levels, although not all may make the final cut, but ill-judged difficulty spikes could kill *Mercury's* appeal. Maclean is quick to acknowledge the challenge: "That's exactly what we're working on at the moment. Those levels you played are currently in the training world but I'm probably going to push them to world two, because they're not elementary enough." Conversation soon turns to *Super Monkey Ball's* infamous Expert Level 7 and veers past *Leisure Suit Larry* on the way to discussing new ways for games to monitor player's progress. It bodes well for *Mercury* that its makers are so easily distracted by debates on game design.

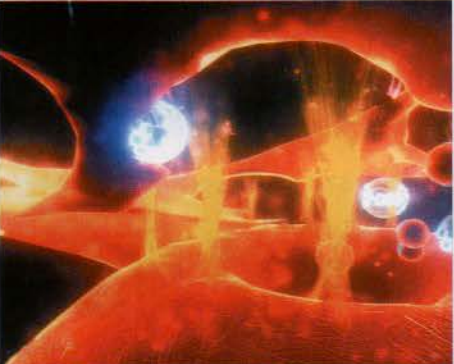
"The game might look simple – but when you look at the maths going on suddenly technically it looks like quite a challenge"

Maclean is also easily distracted by the subject of originality. "As far as we know there just aren't many original games coming out for the PSP launch. I think



Although screen furniture is kept to a minimum, the mercury gauge gives you an essential readout on how much metal you've spilled



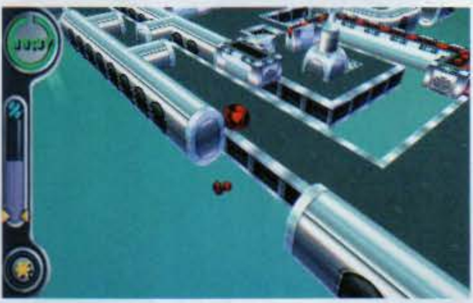




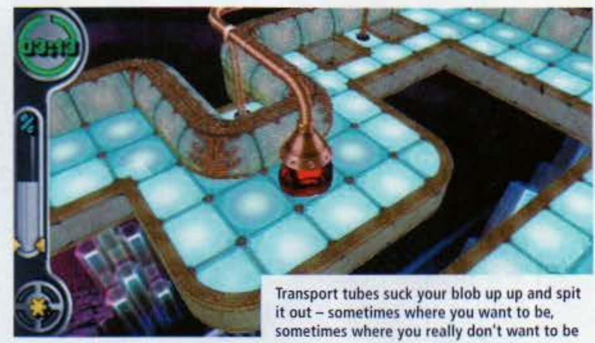
Each of the game's six worlds has a dramatically different theme, which forms a lavish backdrop to the stark geometry of the mazes. Each will be introduced by a short – but jaw-dropping – movie, which will take full advantage of the PSP's big screen







One of the most appealing aspects of the game is how strongly the physics of the blob informs how you play. Tricky narrow sections can't be handled by tiptoeing – you'll need to get up some speed to tease your blob into a long thin trail, otherwise it may start to leak off the edges



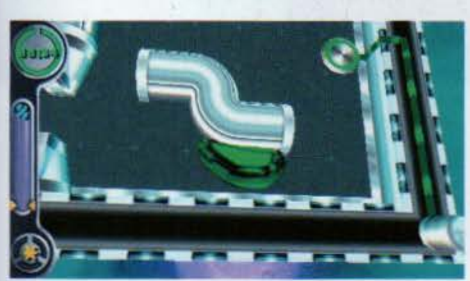
Transport tubes suck your blob up up and spit it out – sometimes where you want to be, sometimes where you really don't want to be

there's going to be 15 to 20 launch titles that are going to be *GT 3.5* and *Tekken 29* and there'll be one or two original titles. And I think one of the reasons that we're under the spotlight with Sony is that they recognise that their brand new piece of hardware needs a game which is a whole step beyond where everything is at the moment – something simple, something visually striking, something where it's obvious what you're supposed to do, and which isn't a sequel."

He also has an answer for why original games are currently in such short supply: management. "At E3 last year we were looking for a US distribution partner, so I was showing the game to, well, naming no names, but it was a company that's now gone bust. So I was meeting with their VP of marketing, and I asked him to sign an NDA before showing him some of the deeper stuff about how *Mercury* worked. He just folded his arms and said: 'I don't care who you are, I've been in this industry for eight whole years now and whatever game design you've thought of, I've already thought of it before you. So there's no point in getting me to sign an NDA.' I said: 'Well, I'm really sorry, but then I can't show you the game because it really is an original idea.' And he says: 'Yeah, yeah I hear that ten times a day. Trust me, you've got nothing I haven't seen before.' So I couldn't show him the game."

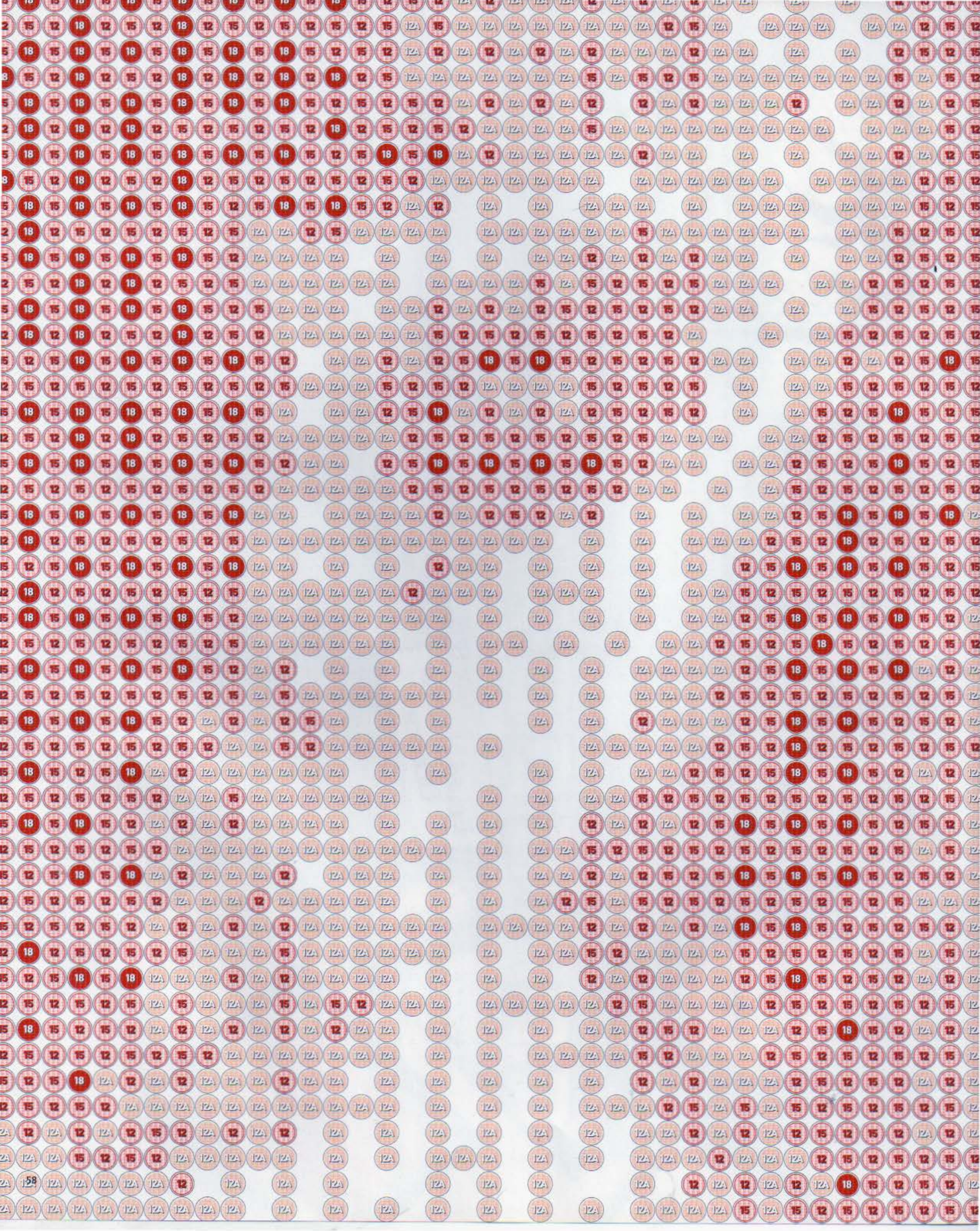
We wonder aloud how he resisted the temptation to lamp him. Maclean laughs: "There were other people in the room. I could have lamped him if there was no-one else there. No witnesses! The rest of the guys present, the European guys, were all right. They all signed the NDA and saw the game and loved it. But this guy couldn't realise that I was about to show him something that was actually unique. And that's a problem for this industry. Over the years I've had all sorts of problems with being approached by platform holders and they would say: 'You do all these snooker and pool games, can you do a sequel for us?' And yes, of course we could, but that means we're just stuck in a rut. I've done, I dunno, 14 snooker and pool titles, and God knows how many derivative versions, but we won't be doing any more." He pauses, smiles, and shakes his head. "Famous last words!"

Being stuck in a rut is a peculiarly painful situation for someone as relentlessly inventive as Maclean. "I have a million ideas a day," he jokes, before deadpanning: "You have to filter out the good one." There may be 999,999 duds (rejected notions during our interview include a solar panel charger for the PSP and a gaming handheld called The Grope), but there are developers who struggle to have one good idea per project, let alone seven a week. *Archer Maclean's Mercury*, with its irresistible premise and painstaking execution, shows real promise of being that one in a million.



The flow of the mercury is enormously satisfying, smooshing round the obstacles as it slithers and shimmers its way around the maze







CLASSIFIED

TAKE A LOOK DOWN THE SPINES OF YOUR GAMES AND SEE HOW MANY HAVE A FAMILIAR CIRCULAR LOGO ON THEM. WITH VIDEOGAME VIOLENCE MAKING HYSTERICAL HEADLINES, WE LOOK AT THE WORK OF THE BBFC

A quick trawl of the videogames available at our local shop reveals an array of symbols on the packaging. Many games are dressed with the content pictograms of the Pan European Games Information system (PEGI), providing consumers with various details to help with their purchases. This information includes a suggested minimum age for the game and symbols denoting content: a spider for horror, a syringe for drugs, a clenched fist for violence. A select few carry the symbols of the British Board Of Film Classification (BBFC) made familiar from years of going to the movies: 12, 15, 18 – everyone knows what these symbols mean. We spoke to the BBFC about videogame classification in the UK and Europe. Why does a film body classify games at all? How does it do it? And what is it looking for?

The classification of games was thrust back into the spotlight by the tragic events in Leicester earlier this year. When Warren LeBlanc beat his friend Stefan Pakeerah to death with a hammer, *Manhunt* was fingered as the killer's inspiration. (The fact that it was the victim and not the murderer who owned Rockstar's video nasty was missed

and then conveniently ignored by the press, who happily continued to lay the blame at the door of a familiar bete noire.) It's not difficult to recall other instances of games being used by the press in this way. *GTA*, *Carmageddon*, *Hooligans: Storm Over Europe*, *Mortal Kombat*; all have been accused of encouraging crime. *Doom* was supposedly the inspiration for the Columbine shootings.

The Entertainment Leisure Software Publishers Association (ELSPA) defended Rockstar: "The game is classified 18 by the British Board Of Film Classification, and should not have been in possession of a juvenile," it said. Truth is, Rockstar did everything required of it. Playing it by the book gave the firm a sturdy defence against the hysterical attacks, and the furore quickly went away.



In its day, *Mortal Kombat*'s gratuitous usage of blood and, in particular, its 'fatality' moves (which, among others, involved ripping out an adversary's spinal cord) shocked the gaming community

You might ask why a body responsible for movies has anything to do with videogames at all. The British Board Of Film Censorship (as it then was) was established in 1912. It was, and remains, an independent, non-governmental body funded through the fees it charges to those who submit films, videos and games for classification. It was originally concerned with the classification of film alone. **Mark Dawson**, an examiner at the BBFC, takes up the story: "Parliament passed the Video Recordings Act [VRA] in 1984 and designated the BBFC as the authority responsible for classifying video. The VRA also included videogames among the various media that required classification, and appointed the BBFC as the body with responsibility for classifying them. The following year saw the board change its title to the British Board Of Film Classification to reflect the fact that classification, and not censorship, was playing a much larger role in our work."

So why don't all games carry BBFC ratings? "The simple answer is that there are two separate systems overlaying one another," explains **Jim Cliff**, another examiner at the BBFC. "One is mandatory, the other voluntary. The VRA established the mandatory system, but most games are exempt and rely on the overlapping voluntary system. The issue of exemption is key."



Obscure text adventure *Dracula In London* was the first game to receive BBFC classification

Under the VRA, statutory classification is required if, to a significant extent, a videogame depicts human sexual activity or acts of force or restraint associated with such activity; mutilation or torture of, or other acts of gross violence toward, humans or animals; human genital organs or urinary or excretory functions; techniques likely to be useful in the commission of offences or criminal activity that might encourage the commission of offences. Other legal requirements apply: the Protection Of Children Act makes it an offence to publish indecent images of a child; the Obscene Publications Act insists that classification must be refused if a work is 'obscene.' As yet, no game has yet breached these statutes, but as the scope of content found in games continues to widen, the chances that something near the knuckle might appear increases.

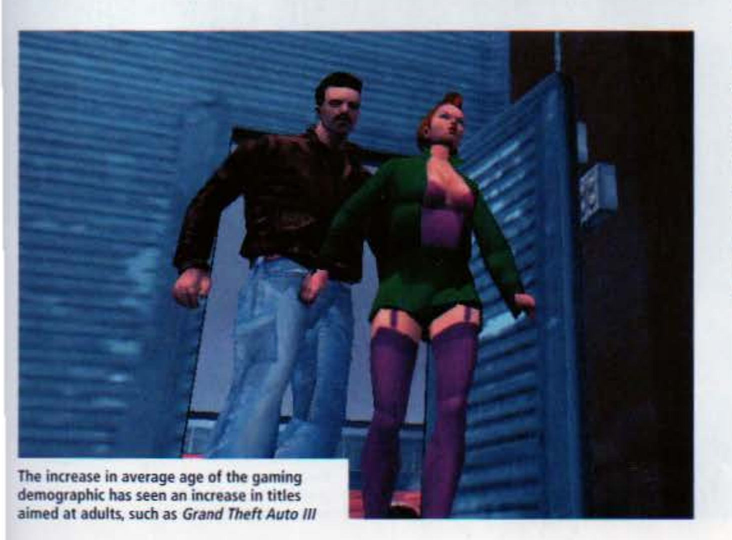
"The possibility of harm is the thing that drives classification," Dawson explains. "Parents want help regulating their children's use of games, while the law requires us to protect users from anti-social influences."

IT IS NEITHER COMPULSORY FOR A PUBLISHER TO APPLY FOR A PEGI RATING NOR CARRY THE RATING ON PACKAGING. THE RATING IS ADVISORY ONLY

So far, so good – but the classification regime is a little more complicated than that. From 1994 until March 2003, a voluntary rating system for videogames in the UK was created by ELSPA and administered by the Video Standards Council (VSC) as an independent third party. Under the ELSPA system, games were rated at either 3+, 11+, 15+ or 18+. Any games applying for a 15+ or 18+ ELSPA ratings were examined by the VSC, which assisted publishers in reaching a decision as to whether a game could be considered exempt under the VRA.

In April 2003, the ELSPA system was replaced by the PEGI age rating system, covering sixteen European countries and administered by the Netherlands Institute For The Classification Of Audiovisual Media (NICAM). Once again, the VSC administers the scheme in the UK. Classification under the PEGI system relies upon a self-assessment form and uses the information provided to propose a rating. If the proposal is for 3+ or 7+, NICAM will allow the PEGI age rating logo to be used on the packaging. If the rating is 12+, 16+ or 18+, the game will be passed to the VSC, which views the game to ensure the proposed rating is correct. If, after studying the form and viewing the game, the VSC considers that the game has lost its exemption from statutory classification, then it will be submitted to the BBFC. Like ELSPA, PEGI is a voluntary system. It is neither compulsory for a publisher to apply for a PEGI rating nor compulsory to carry the rating on packaging. If it is carried, the rating is advisory only – which means there is no legal restriction on the sale of the game to minors.

Recent controversy over current Daily Mail favourite, *Manhunt*, highlighted the need to ensure age ratings are observed by retailers

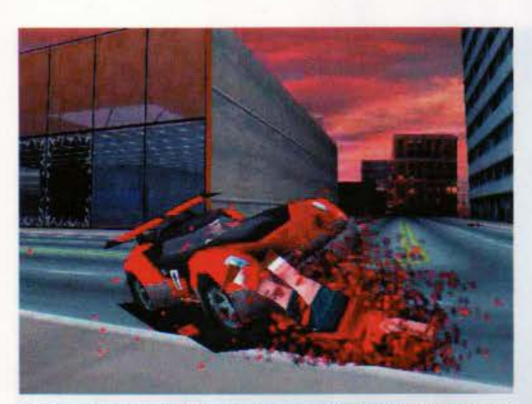


The increase in average age of the gaming demographic has seen an increase in titles aimed at adults, such as *Grand Theft Auto III*

The BBFC started classifying games in the late 1980s with a trio of Universal monsters. The first game to receive a certificate was the little known text adventure, *Dracula In London*. This was followed by *Frankenstein* and then *Wolfman*. Since then, it has passed hundreds of games, only refusing a certificate for the first version of *Carmageddon* (before the pedestrians were replaced by zombies spewing green blood). It almost never cuts games these days, the only examples that came to the minds of Cliff and Dawson being *Phantasmagoria 2* and *Harvester*.

"We know cutting games can be a difficult process," Cliff admits, "and that's why we encourage producers of potentially difficult works to get in touch with us before they embark on final production. We have a good relationship with the industry and we're happy to provide our early thoughts on a title."

The majority of games don't need to be classified. Sports games, flight or driving sims, educational software or digital tools are likely to be exempt under the VRA. But what happens when a game comes in for classification? "The board has a dedicated team of digital media


Proof you can hide a shocking game by using shock tactics: *Carmageddon* should have crashed into oblivion at retail, instead it ensured SCi's future

examiners," Dawson says. "Most of us have been gamers for years and still play games outside of the office. I started with *3D Monster Maze* on the ZX81 and haven't really stopped playing since. All of us are equally passionate about games."

The average game can be sent in from anywhere between a couple of weeks to a couple of months before its scheduled release date. Each is assigned a unique registration number and then examined during a pre-viewing assessment by the board's IT department. This exercise ensures that the submission is stable and running as expected, provides an estimate of the time needed to view the work as well as technical information for the examiners. The amount a company pays is dependent upon the amount of time needed to examine the work, charged at the same rate as for films and videos, typically £1,650. Once funds are in place, the game joins the queue of works waiting to be classified.

"Each game is assigned to a team of two examiners who specialise in digital media. They will typically spend five hours playing it. Many take an incredible amount of time to complete – I think *San Andreas* takes about 50 hours – and of course it's impractical for us to spend long enough to go through it from start to finish. Rockstar provided us with a God mode cheat for that game, and we are often supplied with cheats and walkthroughs which help enormously," says Dawson. "On other occasions, the submitting company might provide us with a video detailing the more contentious moments of a game. Acclaim recorded each of the fatalities in *Mortal Kombat: Deception*, meaning that we didn't have to perform the moves ourselves. At the end of the assessment, the examiners will discuss the game between themselves and seek to reach a consensus as to the classification it should be awarded. Their decision is influenced by referring to a set of guidelines based upon the most comprehensive public consultation ever undertaken by a content regulator. Detailed reports are then written and filed."

What factors influence the decision of the examiners? "A 15-rated game might typically include fantasy themes and settings, clearly defined narratives, moderate levels of blood and gore and elements within the game that take it beyond simple violence, which may require puzzle solving or the player to act stealthily," says Cliff. An example of a recent 15-rated game is *Half Life 2*. As he explains: "Although it contained violence, the player was required to solve puzzles, interact with NPCs and play with stealth. Games with 18 ratings are more likely to include realistic and contemporary settings, criminal themes, limited narrative, stronger levels of blood and gore and violence as the foremost pleasure and motivation." Like, for example, *San Andreas*.

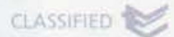
"But at the end of the day, the guidelines are just that: guidelines," says Dawson. "Classification decisions take all of these factors into account as well as the overarching principle of context." If they can agree on a classification, their decision will be considered by a senior examiner and, if he or she agrees with them, that will be the certificate that it is awarded. If the team disagrees, or if the senior examiner feels that a second opinion is required, the game will be passed onto another team. The process is thorough and surprisingly quick.

GAMES WITH 18 RATINGS ARE MORE LIKELY TO INCLUDE REALISTIC SETTINGS, STRONGER BLOOD AND GORE AND VIOLENCE AS THE FOREMOST MOTIVATION

The rationale for classifying videogames becomes ever clearer as the gap separating them from movies continues to shrink. With the games industry grossing more than Hollywood, with a game like *San Andreas* using Hollywood voice talent and a script that wouldn't disgrace a Spike Lee flick, and with the next iteration of consoles promising to narrow the gap still further, Cliff believes it is indefensible for videogames to be treated differently from movies: "The incredible increase in the quality of



While the violence in *Hooligans: Storm Over Europe* is more an ugly cartoon than anything graphically shocking, its theme was too close to home to be dismissed as 'just a game'





Phantasmagoria 2 lived up to its subtitle – *A Puzzle Of Flesh*. Its use of explicit FMV and the way it closely intertwined violence with sex made it particularly difficult for the BBFC to pass uncut

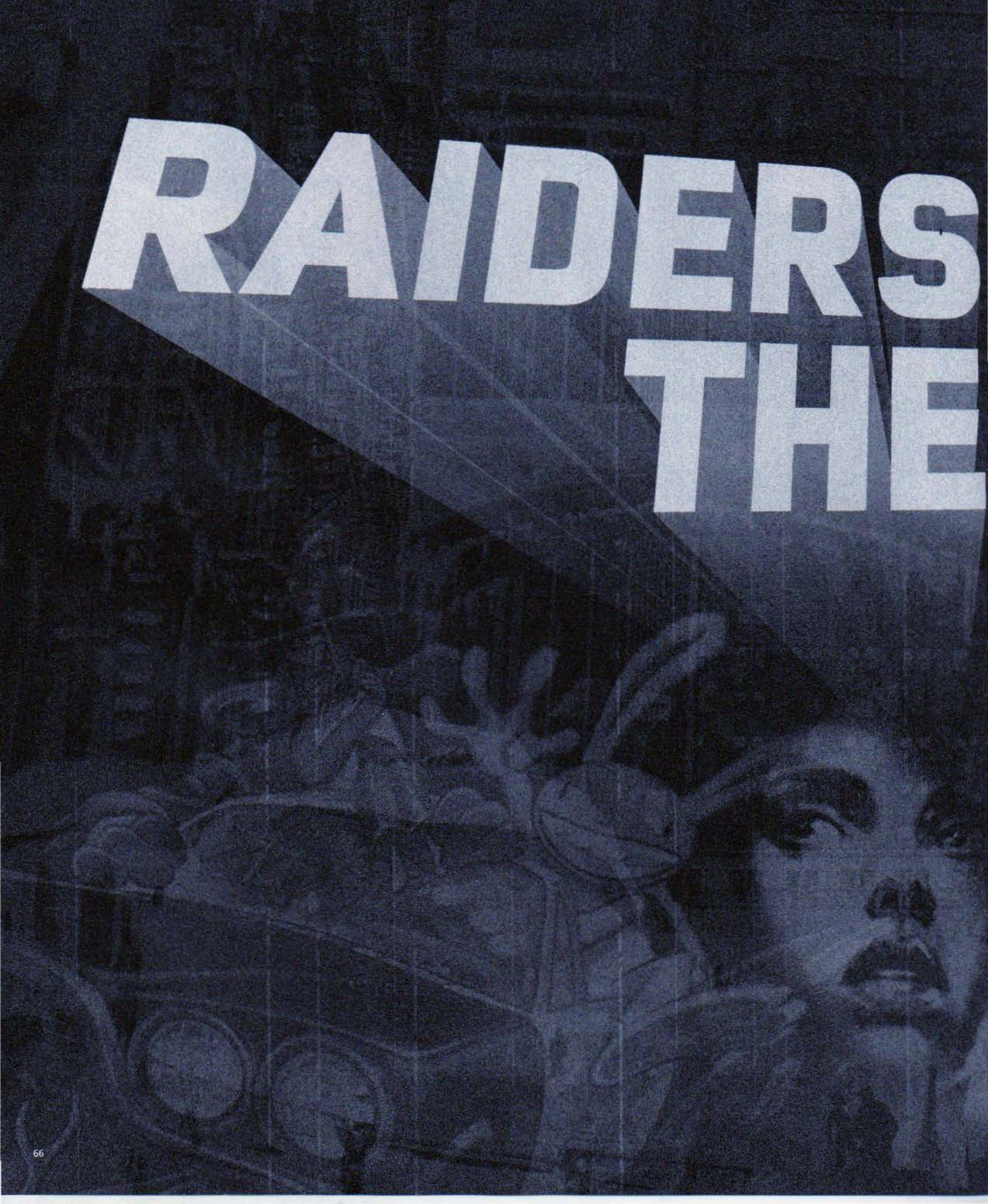
computer animation over the past two decades means that games are looking more and more like film, and it seems that it won't be long until the animators manage to fool some of us, some of the time. *Final Fantasy* is a long way from *Q-Bert*.

"The VRA was drafted in 1984 at a time when gamers were playing *Pitfall* and *Elite* on their BBC Micros. It was another year or so before *Super Mario Bros* and *Tetris* were released. The first generation of gamers has grown up now and, with the average age of consumers now regarded to be in the mid-20s, developers have responded by providing games with more adult content. The demand for more immersive storylines means an increasing number of games are following a linear narrative, essentially creating an interactive film experience. The recognition within the industry that gamers are just as likely to be adults as children has lead to the inclusion in many games of edgier elements such as horror, drugs and offensive language," he says.



An early scapegoat, *Doom* has been blamed for a number of incidents, most famously for the Columbine shootings in April 1999

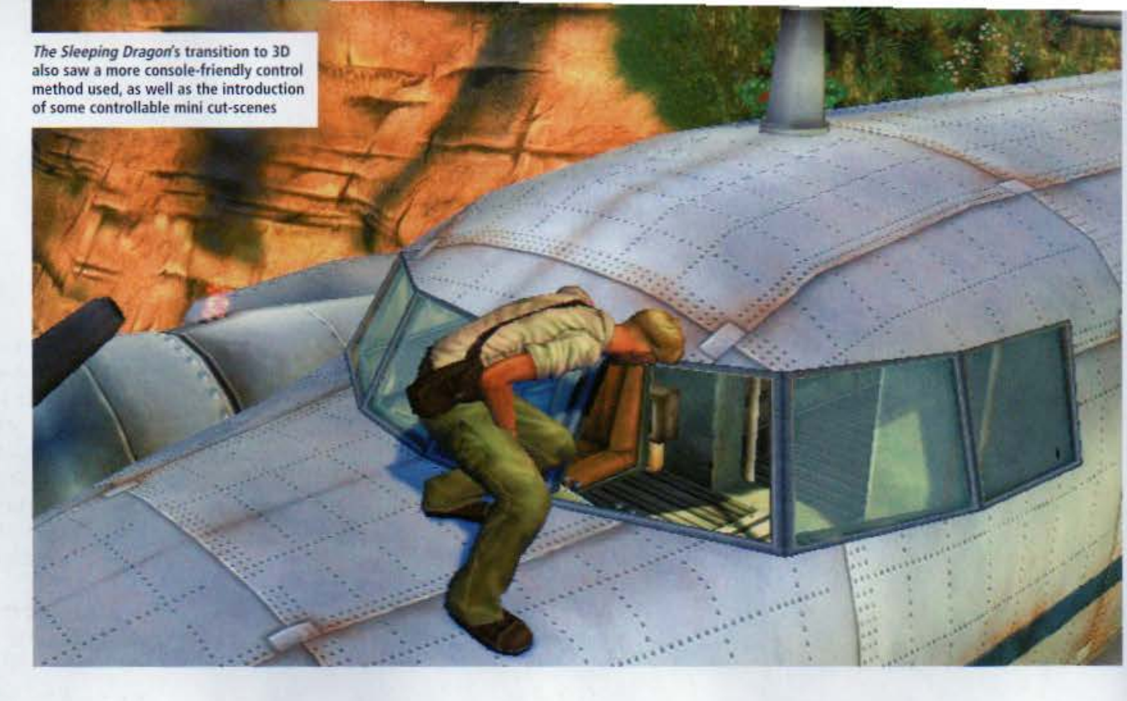
Dawson and Cliff both agree that the amount of games that come before the BBFC is likely to rise sharply in the next few years. The mature content being found in games, and the promise of even greater processing power from the next generation of consoles, means that more and more games are likely to lose their VRA exemption and require statutory classification. That's something the BBFC is well equipped to handle. The digital media team at Soho Square views its role as far more than just an adjunct to its normal task of classifying film and video. With both examiners we spoke to having already taken delivery of new slimline PS2s and waiting anxiously for news on the PS3 and Xbox2, it's clear that games are something they take very seriously indeed.


RAIDERS
THE

OF LOST ART

AFTER A COUPLE OF HIGH-PROFILE CANCELLATIONS, THE FUTURE OF POINT-AND-CLICK GAMING HANGS IN THE BALANCE. IS THIS THE END OF THE LINE FOR GRAPHIC ADVENTURES?

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. **E**131's Testscreen section opened with a glowing appraisal of *Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon*, hailing the 'glorious return' of adventure gaming. By successfully reinventing an adventure franchise so associated with the days of the 2D point-and-click interface, Revolution had skilfully demonstrated that the shift to three dimensions needn't necessarily equate to the death of the genre – a notion entertained by some following the *Monkey Island* series' uninspiring push into 3D. Things were looking good. Not only had Revolution delivered the shot in the arm the genre so badly needed, but work was also well underway on the sequel to one of the adventure genre's most revered titles, *Sam & Max Hit The Road*. Just as it seemed that it had left graphic adventures behind to concentrate resources on the bankability of the Star Wars licence, LucasArts had announced that it was developing *Sam And Max: Freelance Police* as well as *Full Throttle: Hell On Wheels*, another sequel based


The Sleeping Dragon's transition to 3D also saw a more console-friendly control method used, as well as the introduction of some controllable mini cut-scenes

on a well-received original. *Hell On Wheels* fell by the wayside in August 2003, but in *Freelance Police* adventure enthusiasts had the reassurance they required. Sierra might no longer be around, but Revolution and LucasArts were both on board. This was it. A glorious return indeed.

By March 2004, LucasArts wanted off the train. Citing 'current marketplace realities' and 'underlying economic considerations', the company suddenly canned *Freelance Police*. From a shot in the arm to a kick in the teeth in one fell swoop. **Steve Purcell**, creator of the *Sam & Max* universe, was particularly vociferous in his reaction to the cancellation, calling it a "mystifying" and "short-sighted" move. Months down the line, he still finds it hard to accept the reasoning behind the decision: "You could have made a similar press statement when *Hit The Road* was about to come out. It was not a huge first-day seller but it somehow endures. The sequel would have been out by now and people could be enjoying it. It's still frustrating, but in light of current developments at LucasArts it's obvious that the writing was on the wall for quite some time."

Sales of *The Sleeping Dragon*, although steady, didn't exactly set the world alight. Despite an abundance of praise from many quarters, the game didn't have as big an impact as predicted in **E**131's review. Revolution had taken a few bold decisions in moving the *Broken Sword* series into 3D, such as the inclusion of *Shenmue*-style QTE events, stealth sections and block-shifting puzzles – all of which were at odds with the 'pure' adventure experience. The stealth sections, in particular, which brought a get-it-wrong-and-you're-dead element to the genre not seen since the days of Sierra, were a worrying nod to the need to appeal to a more mainstream audience. "The action elements in *Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon* were intended to make the game feel dynamic and exciting while adhering to the key gameplay components of an adventure," says Revolution MD **Charles Cecil**. "In hindsight, we may have moved slightly too far from this mantra – a block in an adventure should have an absolute outcome, even if this is achieved through systemic gameplay, and in some of the stealth sections this was not the case."

Purcell understands the need to keep things fresh, fully advocating the inclusion of action elements: "I think adventure game developers are having to walk a fine line between drawing in new consumers and pleasing their core audience. Some 'hardcore' adventure gamers believe that any action elements are a breach of credibility. For me, I get bored with games easily so I like to mix it up a bit."

"Adventure game developers are having to walk a fine line between drawing in new consumers and pleasing their core audience. Some gamers believe that any action elements are a breach of credibility"

Hopefully Revolution can find the right balance when it comes to the sequel to *Beneath A Steel Sky*, its 1994 sci-fi point-and-click title. Still only in the early stages of development, the surprise announcement of a new *Steel Sky* title came as a huge boost to those disheartened by LucasArts' apparent abandonment of the adventure genre. Here again we have a game with the potential to please those already committed to adventure gaming while also winning around a whole new set of fans. Cecil is confident that the audience is still out there: "*Beneath A Steel Sky* still has a cult following, ten years after its release. It is a game that is fondly remembered both inside



Sam & Max Hit The Road **is playable again on ScummVM. It can be run on PCs as well as Macs, Linux and PocketPC/Palm devices**

Revolution and among adventure fans. We wanted to write a game that merged adventure with RPG, and the characters, world and setting of *Beneath A Steel Sky* suited this ambition well."

Those who missed out on the delights of the original first time around can download it for free from the Revolution website (www.revolution.co.uk), along with the company's first published adventure genre title, *Lure Of The Temptress*. Both can be played on modern machines thanks to ScummVM (head to www.scummvm.org) compatibility. It's a smart move – by advocating the downloading of some of its older adventures, Revolution is likely to build a bigger following in the run up to the new game.

"In hindsight, releasing the games as a free download in order to increase interest in a sequel would have been a brilliant marketing tactic. The reality is much less planned," says Cecil. "The games were written for hardware that is now long outdated. We really had nothing to lose by working with ScummVM and then encouraging free downloads. I have been very surprised at the level of goodwill this has caused – and baffled that other companies have been so reluctant to do the same."

Originally designed to allow modern machines to run classic LucasArts adventures such as *Day Of The Tentacle* and the *Monkey Island* series, ScummVM also allows such titles to be run on Pocket PCs, opening up a whole new audience for the genre. Featuring touch-screen technology, these machines feel like a natural home for the point-and-click adventures of old, providing a fluidity of control and ease of navigation. With one of the Nintendo DS's dual screens set to be a touchscreen, is handheld gaming the way forward for the genre? Sure enough, Nintendo has announced *Another*, a top-down adventure title with the emphasis firmly on puzzle solving using both the touchscreen and microphone. With this kind of innovation, adventure gaming could well be embarking on an exciting new journey.

Nintendo isn't the only one to get in on the act, however, as one of Sega's PSP titles has been recently confirmed as a graphic adventure. Details are scarce right now, but it's clear that new handheld technologies are seen as viable platforms for an adventure renaissance.

As for the destiny of such games for under-the-TV consoles, the outlook is not looking so fat with potential. Other than *The Sleeping Dragon* and the under-appreciated *Syberia* games from Microids, noteworthy adventure games have been hard to come by on PS2, Xbox and GameCube. A stumbling block comes with the common belief that adventure gaming became popular on the PC, so that's where its future lies.

"In many respects, adventures feel like PC games because that's how they are designed," says writer/designer **Steve Ince**, who was involved in the development of *The Sleeping Dragon*. "If they then get ported to the consoles, they can feel like a PC game that's been converted. The trick is to design the gameplay so that it works on all target platforms. When designing *The Sleeping Dragon*, we discouraged the use of PC-related terms like 'click on' and substituted 'interact with'. It may seem like a small difference, but it gets the team into a different mindset where the platform is non-specific. The gameplay becomes more independent of any interface."

It seems that Revolution is determined to make an impact on the console market. The first two *Broken Sword* titles performed relatively well on the original PlayStation despite expectations to the contrary, and *The Sleeping Dragon* is set for a Platinum release on PS2. Cecil is confident that console gamers are coming around to the appeal of the genre: "While the PC has clearly been the main host format for adventures, the success of the first two *Broken Sword* games on PlayStation proved that adventure games could succeed on consoles. I greatly regret that we didn't adapt the control system to suit the Dual Shock but, at the time, there was a very low sales expectation so the budget for the conversion was negligible."

With the only adventure games in production able to generate any kind of hype tending to be sequels, one point is painfully clear: companies wishing to get an original title off the ground without the comfort of existing IP are in for a bumpy ride. "Given the state of the market for adventures, it would be a real risk to create a new franchise – a risk that is greatly reduced by building on an existing property," states Cecil. "An adventure sequel is more legitimate than with other genres because the games require a new story each time, so don't simply rely on rehashing the same old gameplay with tweaks and new graphics."

It's a predicament known only too well by UK-based development team Hiding Buffalo. Having stormed their way to victory at the University of Dundee Abertay's Dare To Be Digital competition in 2002 with *Gumshoe* (www.gumshoe-online.com), a 3D detective game based in 1930s America, the five students responsible set about trying to earn a publishing deal. Two years on, the three remaining team members – **Niclas**



Quantic Dreams' intriguing *Fahrenheit* continues the trend of adapting cinematic visual tools into graphic adventure narrative – the genre doesn't suffer from such pollination



The Longest Journey **married fantastic escapism with affecting character studies of its well-realised cast, at least two of whom return in *Dreamfall***

Kjellin, **Iwan Roberts** and Tony Horne – have been forced to change tack: "We spoke to a number of publishers about creating *Gumshoe*," explains Roberts. "Although the concept was well received, nobody was willing to gamble on funding a completely new development – especially as the adventure genre seems to be in decline and we weren't going to be using already established IP."

Faced with the choice of either borrowing a large amount of money to finance a new prototype or coming up with a new strategy, Hiding Buffalo looked into delivering episodic content through an online interface. "By using web technology we were able to develop an animated point-and-click adventure that was delivered directly to the user, therefore avoiding the need for publishers and distributors," explains Kjellin.

Once launched, the team hopes to deliver one new episode of *Gumshoe Online* per month, with each edition providing between three and five hours' worth of gameplay, depending on the difficulty of the case and the number of puzzles contained therein. It's an approach that needs a high level of coverage to be successful, but the staff at Hiding Buffalo are working hard to guarantee that once potential customers are made aware of the product, the content is there to entice them back time and time again. One such idea is to approach various crime authors for input into the game's individual cases. Although the initial batch of episodes will be mostly written by Hiding Buffalo itself, the plan is to get some recognised writing talent on board for the future. "We'd like *Gumshoe* to become a library of mysteries with a large number of writers contributing to the game," explains Roberts. "Authors would use us to either promote themselves to a wider audience or as a way to break into the games industry."

It's a terrific idea, of course, and it'll be interesting to see how recruiting star names works out. If it comes off, it could be the selling point the team needs to really get the project off the ground.

Online distribution is also the route that Telltale Games, a team built in response to the collapse of *Sam & Max: Freelance Police*, is set to take. Founded by ex-LucasArts staffers **Dan Connors**, Kevin Bruner and Troy Molander, Telltale is a company dedicated to resurrecting the kind of lively, character-driven adventures associated with the classic LucasArts era. Concentrating on both episodic delivery and a more traditional 'feature-length' approach, Telltale has a number of projects in development. One in particular comes after acquirement of the rights to an 'exciting' existing licence, and although the team are unable to reveal any specifics, the genuine enthusiasm with which they talk about the project indicates that they could well have something special in the pipeline.

"When you think about the old adventure games, and how strongly people still feel about them ten years later, it's really amazing. We have a ton of respect for that. That's what drives our company"

"Our goal is to have someone play a Telltale game and think of it as something unique and special," says Connors. "That's what drives our company. When you think about the old adventure games, and how strongly people still feel about them ten years later, it's really amazing. We have a ton of respect for that."

While the hush-hush project is undoubtedly one to keep an eye on, the smaller, episodic efforts are likely to be worth waiting for too, as Telltale aims to bring licences from well-known authors, game designers and comic books to an online audience. "We are very interested in the concept of 'episodic' games," states Connors. "However, it's important to understand the implications of that approach. Our idea is to make each game a standalone product, enjoyable in and of itself, while at the same time providing arcing storylines that will add to the depth of the experience across episodes." Connors likens Telltale's approach to that of a well-structured sitcom: you can watch and enjoy a single episode, but dedicated fans will benefit from the character development that takes place over the course of a series. "Online distribution is best for an episodic approach, allowing for a much quicker turnaround time," he says. "We want the players to see the Telltale website, and our distribution partners, as virtual TV channels where they can 'tune in' to the latest episodes and interact with their favourite characters."

Telltale Games is a company with the future of adventure gaming in its hands. With experienced staff still so passionate about the genre at the helm, anything is possible – all it needs is the support of the fans. You can lend yours by visiting www.telltalegames.com where you can keep track of the team's projects via its entertaining blog.

It's clear that there are people out there still dedicated enough to the graphic adventure genre to fight its corner until the bitter end. Hopefully the audience is still there too, but patience will be rewarded. *Beneath A Steel Sky*'s sequel is unlikely to see the light of day before 2006, but in the meantime there are a handful of promising titles on the horizon. Due for release by Christmas 2005 is *Dreamfall*, the follow-up to Funcom's highly acclaimed *The Longest Journey*. Ragnar Tornquist, the main man behind both games in the series, is promising to deliver a cinematic experience to rival anything on the shelves.

Moreover, early 2005 will see the release of *Still Life* from Microids. Based on an enhanced version of the *Syberia* engine, the game will toggle between settings in modern-day Chicago and





Iwan Roberts, Tony Horne and Niclas Kjellin of Hiding Buffalo, whose *Gumshoe Online*, above, uses an episodic structure and hopes to attract professional crime-writing talent in the future

1920s Prague, concentrating on two criminal investigations with ever-increasing parallels. The plot may not win any awards for originality, but, going on previous form, *Still Life* is likely to deliver where it matters.

Digital Jesters' *The Moment Of Silence* looks set to appeal to fans of 'dark' adventure games such as Sierra's *Gabriel Knight* series or Westwood's oft-overlooked *Blade Runner*, but perhaps most promising of all is *Fahrenheit* (see **E**132) from Quantic Dream, the studio behind the ambitious *Omikron: The Nomad Soul*. Set for release on PC and consoles in early 2005, *Fahrenheit* has the potential to turn the genre on its head.

Those who can't wait that long should take a look at some of the lower-profile adventure games released on PC in recent months. Digital Jesters' *Sherlock Holmes: The Case Of The Silver Earring*, while far from outstanding, is well worth a try, while the two *Dark Fall* titles from Jonathan Boakes should also be of interest. The games are out there, but the exposure, generally, hasn't.

The adventure genre cannot be allowed to die. Catering for 'mature' gamers without the need to resort to profanity, extreme violence or naked flesh, graphic adventures offer much to an industry often accused of being childish. Providing an intellectual workout as well as grand storylines and strong characterisation, these games offer unique challenges that would be sorely missed.

On the subject of characterisation, this is also a genre that has served up some of the strongest



***Full Throttle*, a heavy metal adventure by Tim Schafer, was one of LucasArts' last great adventure games, and worth hunting down**

female depictions to date. *Monkey Island*'s Elaine Marley, *Syberia*'s Kate Walker, *Broken Sword*'s Nico Collard and *The Longest Journey*'s April Ryan simply put the likes of Lara Croft to shame.

As traits of the adventure game are absorbed into other, cross-genre titles – for example, the simplified pick up/combine/use mechanic utilised in the *Resident Evil* games – the danger of the genre becoming obsolete increases. Nevertheless, there will always be a place for adventure games. After all, which other genre would offer players the chance to control a frontier pharmacist?

More importantly, graphic adventures are in many ways the closest the industry can claim to gripping novels or absorbing movies, a point best summed up by Purcell: "A good story involves the audience and leads them along a certain path. A good adventure should do the same thing, so that you're not just playing to finish – you're playing because you need to know what's around the bend. It's clear that running through hallways shooting at monsters, however unoriginal at this point, is still an engaging experience. The challenge is to make an adventure that is immediately engaging, suspenseful and accessible as that."

Glorious return or not, it seems the graphic adventure is not on its last legs just yet. If the enthusiasm displayed by the likes of Telltale and Revolution is matched by fans of the genre in the coming months, then the question needn't ever be posed again. It's over to you.

DIY DEVELOPMENT

Graphic adventure fans can try their hand at creating their own experiences thanks to a free download which goes by the name of Adventure Game Studio. Featuring a fully customisable interface, AGS allows users to produce original point-and-click games in the vein of the early Sierra and LucasArts efforts.

No programming experience is required to make use of AGS (a number of thorough tutorials are supplied), although scripting is available for those in the know. The website also hosts a selection of amateur adventures created using the program, so it's worth checking back from time to time to see how other users are faring. Visit the website at www.adventuregamestudio.co.uk for details.



Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Virtua Racing



We've had to wait a long time for this arcade-perfect conversion of a groundbreaking classic. The PS2 version has three new tracks, and it's now getting a UK release.
PS2, SEGA

Donkey Konga



Get friends in room. Open wine. Let fun begin. The novelty of joining in with the game from across the room is irresistible, even if some of the cover versions are a bit ropey.
GC, NINTENDO

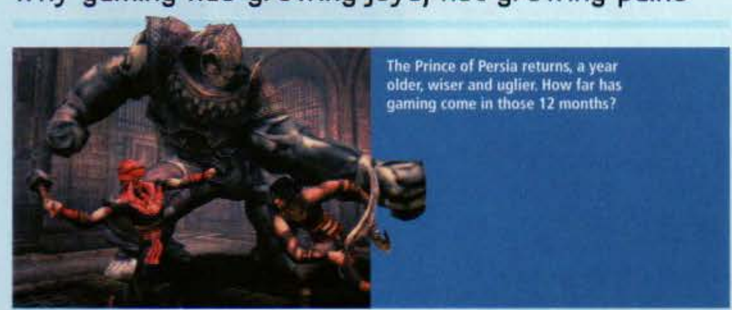
SingStar



Get friends in room. Open wine. Initial reticence is soon overcome by the irresistible desire to join in the fun (even if some of the cover versions turn out to be a bit ropey).
PS2, SONY

Forever young

Why gaming has growing joys, not growing pains



The Prince of Persia returns, a year older, wiser and uglier. How far has gaming come in those 12 months?

It's videogaming's favourite excuse. 'We're a young industry!' we cry, scruffily proud of the failings this excuses – puerile content, chaotic project management, limited demographics. Commentators make earnest, pointless year-by-year comparisons to where film was when it was ten, or 15, or 20. It's a ridiculous excuse for a number of reasons, but the biggest is that it's a ticking time bomb. Will we still be falling back on it in five years? Ten years? What will happen when we hit puberty? Will gaming's balls finally drop?

But just because videogaming doesn't need to grow up doesn't mean it isn't growing. The last two years have produced an escalation of excellence which has constantly surpassed predictions. Two years ago, *Halo* revolutionised our understanding of why shooting things was fun. Now, Bungie is back with the sequel, rising to the thankless task of messing with perfection. That they succeed is surely a badge of maturity and refinement for games as a whole.

A year ago, a Persian prince revolutionised our expectations about something as simple as walking. He's back, but in the meantime *Galleon*, *Ninja Gaiden* and *Spider-Man 2* have shown just how great the scope is for games to exhilarate simply by letting you move through a world. Think about that timeline for a moment. Boundaries are redefined and expectations are confounded in a matter of weeks, not months or years. From the perspective of the player, what was unthought-of in March has become a benchmark by the time May comes around.

In between those milestones, Nokia bankrolled a very public laughing-stock – the result of a newcomer taking baby steps into an industry it wasn't familiar with. Here was a situation where there was some growing-up to be done, and the N-Gage has had to do it with the world looking on. With *Pathway To Glory* there's no doubting it has reached maturity. New to gaming, Nokia has completed an entire life cycle in the time it takes to make a film.

That's how fast it's moving. Here's to Christmas 2005.



HALO 2

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: BUNGIE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E115, E125, E138, E141



Speaking of *Halo 2*, Bungie's **Jason Jones** said this: "It's is a lot like *Halo 1*, only it's *Halo 1* on fire, going 130 miles per hour through a hospital zone, being chased by helicopters and ninjas... and the ninjas are all on fire, too." It is a great quote, and it's true, up to a point. That point is the first comma. *Halo 2* is a lot like *Halo 1*. Anyone expecting more – expecting the hyperbole, expecting the spoilers – will be disappointed.

Tangible changes are few. There are no longer health points visible below your rechargeable shield; the player can take a few hits after the shield's gone, but it's wiser to seek cover. Until you realise that's what's going on, death can seem arbitrary. Afterwards, you can view the design change as a clever way of removing awkward health-packs from the game, albeit one that might benefit from clearer visual feedback. There are new enemies, new weapons and new vehicles. Treats you saw but couldn't touch in the first game are no longer off-limits. There is the dual-wielding system, perhaps more eagerly anticipated than anything else. It works well, not least because the potential damage gain in training two streams of fire on an opponent comes at the price of hampering your access to grenades, melee attacks and gun emplacements. If you want the latter, you'll have to abandon your double firepower.

Less tangible are the changes that have been brought to the familiar. Weapons you thought you knew reload slower and fire faster. Ghosts fly more deftly and fire more furiously. These are not changes that throw your rhythm off: it's hard to point to a single one which isn't a fundamental improvement on the first game. Players who mourn the evolution of old favourites will miss out on exploiting to the full a weapon set which has expanded without making any of its components redundant.

There is also the much-touted visual upgrade: the graphical tricks, improved lighting, realistic physics. Much of that will pass players by, because the combat itself is so involving; except for when there are cracks in the world that snap you back to reality. *Halo* was impeccably solid, perhaps because it actually attempted to do so little, and ended up doing it all so perfectly, absorbing you completely. Here, those richer environments, those more elaborate characters, that playful physics all add to the experience – it's hard not to coo with delight when a hunter swipes a crate away with a furious sweep of his armour-plated forearm. But they also stress the game engine to the point where sometimes, just sometimes, it can't quite cope. Models pop in and out of detail levels. Level scripting fails to kick in, or starts too early.

The combat continues to amaze.

Really. Two years after its release, *Halo* has yet to be surpassed as a standard for firstperson shooter combat. *Halo 2*, at the very least, builds on that fighting spirit and provides more of it for people who are finally tiring of The Silent Cartographer. It's too early to assess whether this game has as many locations that will tirelessly generate stand-out battle moments as *Halo*; instinct says 'no', but time will often prove instinct wrong, and hopefully that will happen here. Regardless, all the compelling duck-and-dive strategy filters through to the multiplayer, which is as tremendous as expected.

That this game builds so squarely on the combat tactics of the first not only strengthens it, but changes how it should be played. If you have mastered *Halo*, then bypass *Halo 2*'s Normal skill setting. Again, instinct might incline you the other way, as *Halo 2*'s battles are so much more vast, so much more densely populated, the air so much thicker with lead and laser that your first reaction is that they must be harder. However, this isn't the case: pitch your battles at the Heroic level instead, and you will enjoy them all the more. The gap from there to Legendary is a chasm to the original *Halo*'s fissure. Meeting the severity of that setting's demands will take you some time, and not all of that time will be enjoyable. Heroic, though, is a joy until the finish.

Until the finish. *Halo 2* finishes very abruptly. It finishes like a soap opera, like a movie brutally cleaved in two. The plot is structured in such a way as to make the game build towards a single point, but the game never actually gets there; it is likely that the one overriding emotion you'll feel on



Two years after its release, Halo has yet to be surpassed as a standard for firstperson shooter combat. Halo 2, at the very least, builds on that

Bungie's tradition of unsurpassed sound design continues, with details such as the satisfying cough with which the rounds leave the rocket launcher's chamber



Kiss kiss bang bang



The frustrations of singleplayer *Halo 2* – most notably the new health system – dissolve in multiplayer. Every innovation and every evolution maximise their multiplayer potential. Vehicles become much more closely tied into combat, and dual-wielding amplifies the range of tactics available to you. Endlessly configurable, the new maps pay homage to old favourites as well as inventing new play patterns. The servers had only just opened by the time we went to press, but from our brief experience of the Live component clans look set to be spoiled with lavish website support. Only the absence of system link co-op sours the joy.







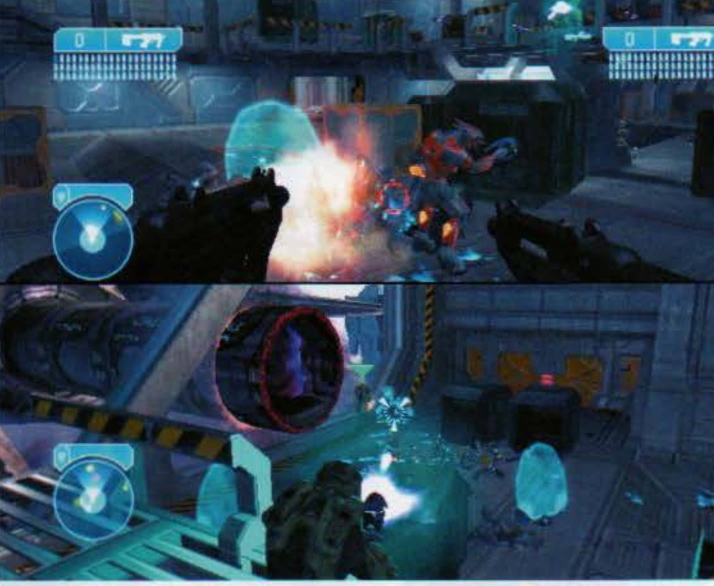
Character models are substantially improved, adding even more charisma to aliens which already had plenty of humanity



Some multiplayer maps have names inspired by *Halo 1*. Somehow, Coagulation manages to sound even nastier than Blood Gulch

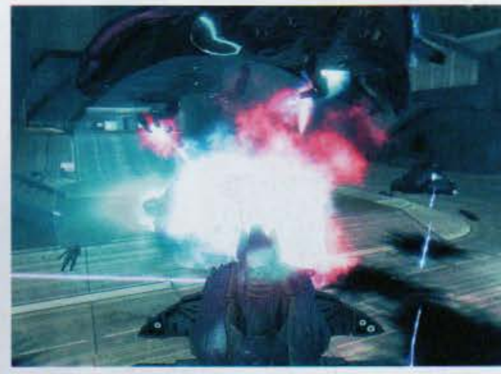




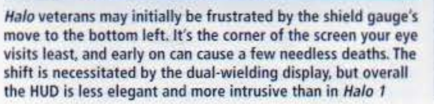


Vehicles form a far more integral part of your arsenal this time round. Consequently, they come equipped with better weapons and faster fire rates. As well as improved handling, some have extra moves – boosts and rolls which are invaluable under heavy fire. When destroyed, they explode with devastating force









Halo veterans may initially be frustrated by the shield gauge's move to the bottom left. It's the corner of the screen your eye visits least, and early on can cause a few needless deaths. The shift is necessitated by the dual-wielding display, but overall the HUD is less elegant and more intrusive than in *Halo 1*

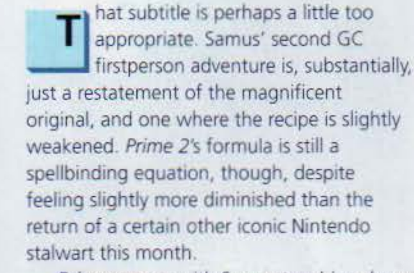


completion is that of having been cheated. It doesn't help that the plot itself is a confusing mess of fan-fiction sci-fi and bemusing Episode-II-style politics. Threads are begun, and left utterly unfinished. Presumably they will be tied up in *Halo 3* – even if Bungie sticks to its guns and moves on to other projects before returning to the series for the inevitable sequel.

But if the plot is *Halo 2*'s worst aspect, then, perversely, the dialogue is the best. There are funny lines here, things that will make you laugh out loud, not just during the cut-scenes but during the game. Your fighting colleagues – who, incidentally, are far stronger than in the first game, but not to the point of doing everything for you – chat amongst themselves with wit and candour. Quips always hit their mark and rarely repeat. No game does that better.

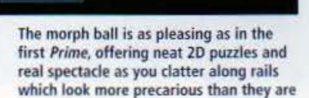
For all the criticisms above, few games do much better than *Halo 2*. And it's fitting that we're able to steal a line from the script to sum everything up. No spoilers here, just an epitaph, from the moment when Cortana turns to Master Chief and says this: "It's not a new plan. But we know it'll work." **[9]**





METROID PRIME 2: ECHOES

FORMAT: GC PRICE: £40 RELEASE: NOVEMBER 26
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: RETRO STUDIOS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E137, E138, E140



The morph ball is as pleasing as in the first *Prime*, offering neat 2D puzzles and real spectacle as you clatter along rails which look more precarious than they are

That subtitle is perhaps a little too appropriate. Samus' second GC firstperson adventure is, substantially, just a restatement of the magnificent original, and one where the recipe is slightly weakened. *Prime 2*'s formula is still a spellbinding equation, though, despite feeling slightly more diminished than the return of a certain other iconic Nintendo stalwart this month.

Echoes opens with Samus touching down on the planet of Aether, attending to a squad of Galactic Federation troopers recently stationed there; it's an impressively moody opening stretch, thanks to the game's confident ability to conjure an atmosphere as thick as any planet, but feels less unnerving and captivating than *Prime*'s excellent space station scene-setter. There's also a little too much déjà-vu during the opening stage, as Samus' forays begin within the kind of industrial locations that feel little removed from the arid ruins of the first game. In general, its looks are grander than the first – the highlighted views and architectural set-pieces are outstanding – but, overall, it feels less cohesive than the original, and nowhere near as impactful.

It's not long, however, before Samus gets her first taste of the Dark Aether (and her first sightings of the mysterious Dark Samus), a toxic, shadowy, inhospitable mirror world of Aether itself. And then the feeling of the new kicks in – the Dark Aether is an impressively gloomy world, suffocating in a range of dense, shifting purple hues and trolled by foes that collapse into puddles of inky blackness and flow around in the murk of it all. That suffocation is more than just imagery, however; the Dark Aether is hostile to the point that Samus can't exist there without coming to harm. Light crystals have been planted around the world to provide bubbles of sanctuary, meaning progress is inhibited and stuttered as the player dashes from one life-giving dome of light to the next. Initially, at least, this works to make the Dark Aether feel like a truly brutal and dangerous environment, a fact reinforced by the seeming lack of an attainable map schematic for the parts you haven't explored. The two dimensions are closely reflected, however, and overlaid beautifully thanks to the still-excellent wireframe map system. The duality of these worlds does feel somewhat of a missed opportunity in terms of the complexity of relationship between the two. Much like *Sudeki*, there's little elegance or subtlety involved in the structure, and nothing here can hold a match to *A Link To The Past*. Samus' light and dark beams do, however, hold a little strategy – as using one reaps ammo for the other. Ultimately, though, this bond feels underplayed.

Despite the core mechanics behind it all feeling a little too familiar – the dark visor, for example, being the functional equivalent of the x-ray visor – it's still a hauntingly pretty game with a sense of ambience, adventure and exploration that few other games can match, thanks in part to that dramatic synth soundtrack. The scales of the locations, the lush detail embedded in the plant life, seared metal and scorched rocks, can't be taken for





The Dark Aether is an impressively gloomy world, suffocating in dense purple hues and trolled by foes that collapse into puddles of inky blackness





The light beam is quick to fire, and causes some sparkling light effects; kill a dark enemy with it, and they'll singe away prettily. The dark beam is more ponderous, but can savage enemies in the light world with a few rounds



The lock-on is still solid, so much so that it doesn't detract much from the fact that *Prime 2* isn't controlled with twin analogue sticks. It can let you down at times, though, and can cling to fallen enemies a vital second or so after their death









Scandyman



Prime 2's scan system is less subtle than in the original, but all the more useful for it. Instead of little orange squares denoting scan-worthy objects, everything is now painted in obvious, unmistakable RGB – red for objects of urgent note, green for things already recorded in your vast notebook and blue for enemies and scenery. Once again, there are rewards for achieving high scanning percentages, and logging a boss will sometimes cause your lock-on to target a more vital hit spot; plus, there's a mammoth backstory in the form of 'lore', acquired from computer screens and corpses, allowing you to read up on the history of the situation behind _Echoes_ without having to bear the weight of story-laden cut-scenes.



One of the first of many breathtaking sights is the hall filled with a line of giant lenses, which need to be aligned in order to activate your first portal point into the Dark Aether



Space Pirate turrets feature in the main campaign as well as multiplayer. They're enormously powerful, so much so that chunks of scenery can be toppled to further your progress

granted, despite the fact that it's only during the second half of the game – once Samus has cleared the second dark temple and enters a technology-rich complex filled with the most interesting enemies in the game – that the player gets a sense of progression for the series, thanks to an environment that feels as fresh as it remains unmistakably *Metroid*.

There are moments, too, where *Echoes* feels markedly inferior to the original, namely in terms of some of its bosses. They're nearly always terrifying and towering, but too many of them are just dull and drawn-out battles of patient weak-point activation, to the point of starting to lose feeling in the lock-on finger; it makes them less tricky than in the original, sure, but they're still far less engaging a climax than befits their guardian status. And the splitscreen multiplayer, while a worthwhile and thoughtful addition, is far from excellent. The six available arenas aren't very large but, thanks to the canny inclusion of numerous elements from the main game, it's enjoyably raucous, if limited, with the full complement of four players.

Regardless of the amount of familiarity, though, *Echoes* is as solid and tangible as ever: the uncluttered HUD, the gentle rumble as Samus touches down from her unfaltering jumps, the ingeniously tucked-away power-ups, the smoothness and surety of movement. Its combat and exploration, if taken separately, can feel a little hollow and basic, but taken together they're still a powerful combination for a rewarding adventure. It's too much a sequel by numbers, true, but they're still the kind of numbers that few other games seem able to match. **[8]**





GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ROCKSTAR GAMES DEVELOPER: ROCKSTAR NORTH
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E140, E141, E142





A 'trip skip' option allows you to bypass the duller parts of a mission when repeating it after failure. It's a half-hearted alternative to actually useful mission checkpoints, since reloading your most recent save is often less hassle than having to restock your cache of weapons



Overwhelming and underwhelming. That's how *San Andreas* feels to begin with. Underwhelming because, despite all the pillow talk preview promises and all the dreams and wish lists sown in the wake of *Vice City*, this is still unmistakably *GTA*, wrinkles and all. And it's overwhelming through sheer, intimidating scale: in the enormity and scope of the game presented before you, so large and expansive that you're still unsure of whether or not you've got any measure of it despite hours of invested play and progress.

It's an apt mix of feelings, really, considering just how *San Andreas* – like its two PS2 forebears – continues to foster so much ambivalence. Crime-spree missions that entertain as much as they frustrate; visuals that swagger with style, character and rough, eyesore edges; a draw distance that strives to pack in the skeletal outline of an entire city while textures are drawn in just metres in front of lead character CJ; a game world that's as solid, continuous and mesmerising as it is glitchy and prone to breaking down. The missions are possibly the most creative and focussed to yet grace a *GTA*, but still manage to infuriate as much as any of the classic *GTAIII* and *Vice City* sticking points, thanks as much to your unavoidable dependance on unreliable NPC partners as the fact that your mission can be brought to a juddering, unjust failure. It's that typical *GTA* trait of brilliant, horrible freedom – completing a mission is an unparalleled satisfaction, thanks as much to the sensation of having improvised your own DIY solution, as having survived the chaotic whims of a bustling city filled with violent pedestrians and suicidal drivers.

The game is so fat with possibilities and details that you're pretty much forced to turn to the missions in order to enlighten you as to the available avenues for profitable exploration and joyous time wasting. Exploration is more daunting than ever before; it's possible to spend hours treasure hunting in just one of *San Andreas'* many massive districts and not unearth a single reward. The sense of freedom is unprecedented, but conditional; you'll only feel comfortable with it after diligently completing enough missions to give you enough power and knowledge to make any use of it. You've got to earn the sandbox this time around, and willingly hold the hand of a game whose hallmark up until now has been its lack of handholding.

The controls have been refined, but not redefined. Twin-stick aiming is now possible, but is rarely an effective way to tackle gunfights. Your enemies' best tactic is to pop up and loose off a few shots before you can return superior fire; your best tactic is to get as distant a lock-on as possible. Still, the lock-on system feels more confident and useable, even if it can be easily distracted in the midst of a panicky shoot out. The ability to improve gun skills, along with the inclusion of *Manhunt's* excellent headshot system, does help substantially, meaning that combat is now bearable – a leap over the comedic trauma of past *GTAs*.

For all the framerate drops, pop-up shocks and texture crimes, there are no roaming loading times. It's not short of stylish beauty, either. The bold orange glare of a Los Santos sunset that drenches the whole city, or the night time desert landscape of deep purple and striking silhouettes, helps give the game world a fantastic variety in its ambience. Each district comes packed with geographical personality and a fitting urban drone as backdrop; alone that's an achievement, one that's made all the more affecting thanks to the stark, segregated atmosphere of the countryside portions of

Despite all the pillow talk preview promises and all the dreams and wish lists in the wake of Vice City, this is still unmistakably GTA, wrinkles and all







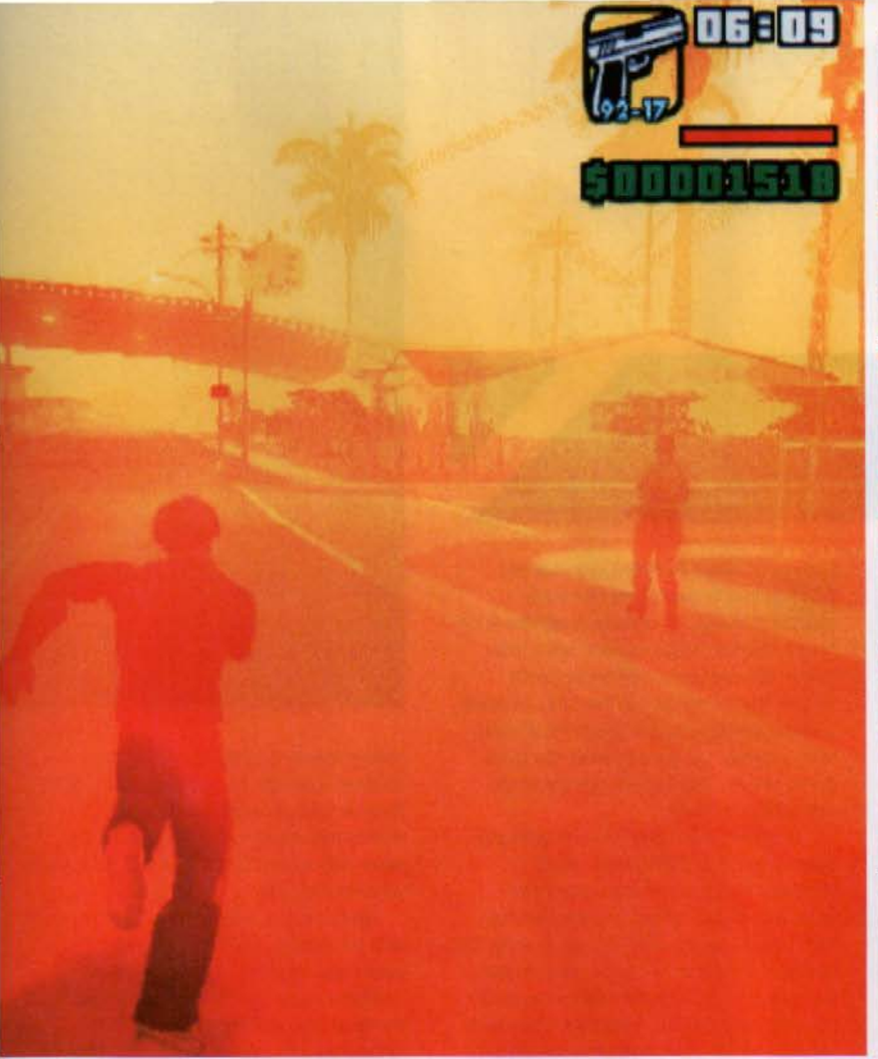
The new-found ability to swim and vault over walls is more than welcome, and helps give the game world a greater sense of continuity and wholeness. Increased lung capacity becomes a necessity if you want to start searching for pearls…





There are hundreds of collectibles to mop up; a completist's wet dream. Some, such as the horseshoes, graffiti tags and snapshots are limited to a certain city. Despite that condition, it's impossible to imagine finding them all without having to depend on an in-depth guide









While your skill upgrades are gradual and permanent, your appearance stats aren't, allowing you to segue from porker to beefcake in a matter of days. There's a wide range of clothes to pick your way through, but the length of time spent in the changing room between selections is maddening

the game. This isn't so much a variety of themes and motifs strung together as a believable caricature of an actual world.

But there's one area in which *San Andreas* excels without fail or blemish – the vehicles. A carjack of all trades, it blends in even more forms of transport this time around – from the humble, joyous BMX to demanding aircraft and parachute descents – that feature supremely balanced handling that's tight enough to provide sure control but relaxed enough to make travel an endlessly enjoyable and pliant way to while away your hours of downtime.

As with previous *GTA* games there's lots to criticise, but *San Andreas* survives, scathed but still walking tall, buoyed by the kind of ambition that sees most games crumbling under the weight of it all. It's a multi-faceted, multi-achieving experience, a rough-edged but massively substantial landmark. It's a masterful marriage of perfectly-pitched vehicle insanity and decent combat, more so than any other *GTA*, but its world is one that demands work as much as it allows play. And, of course, it comes coated in cultural magpie-ism, even if you don't find it as caustically satirical and intelligent as its reputation would have it. Sparkling in enough places, it strides ahead of the majority of games, offering an experience that treats the player as being something more than just a dumb recycling bin for brainless action movies. It's a fact reinforced by the magnificent soundtrack selection, a collection that also makes every other licensed listing seem a like one-dimensional afterthought. And it's the kind of game that leaves the player with their own personalised mix tape of magical memorable moments – as well as a few stress-induced scars, but ones that belong to you, nonetheless.

When you take *San Andreas* apart to look at the bits, it's not too impressive a sight. But it's not a game that's played in such a deconstructive stasis; everything is moving and swirling together before you, and when it all hums in smooth unison it's an unbeatable rush of freedom and empowerment. A ten. A phenomenon. A game like no other. And when it clashes, you're left with a grudging seven. A flawed gem. A broken masterpiece; nothing has *really* changed in three years.

But – much like this review – you're vocalising those flaws so strongly only because you were so deeply, hypnotically engrossed in the first place. **[9]**



The on-screen map can still feel cluttered and misleading, making it hard to fathom the locations of goals and blips, as well as making the finer points of pathfinding a job for someone who knows the game world's streets and alleys



Dozens of arcade machines are scattered around San Andreas. There are four games, each a basic but welcome distraction. *Let's Get Ready To Bumble* (above), is the best of the lot, with *They Came From Uranus* the poorest

Grand theft duo



There are numerous points throughout the game where a second player can join in by pressing Start on another pad. Some of the possibilities include an excellent series of co-operative rampages, framed by an elevated perspective that very nearly turns the game into an isometric shooter, as well as the chance to face off against one another in a pool game. Once you've managed to get yourself an in-game girlfriend, the second player can take control of her, and follow you around as a useful (or problematic) ally. It's not as pleasing as those rampage sessions, though.



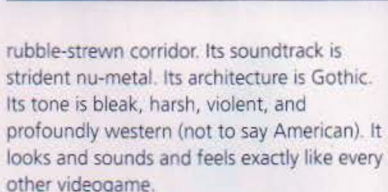
PRINCE OF PERSIA: WARRIOR WITHIN

FORMAT: GC, PC, PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX PRICE: £40
RELEASE: DECEMBER 3 PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E143



Red. Right from the moment the Ubisoft logo dissolves into a shimmering, crimson pool, *Prince Of Persia: Warrior Within* is drenched in the colour. Torches blaze with angry, ruddy flames; the crumbling architecture is draped in claret; battles erupt in fountains of vivid gore. In a tiny but pivotal detail, the grim prince wears a scarlet sash, signifying his newly bloody intent.

It's a stark shift from the hazy gold and deep indigo that suffused last year's inaugural remake, and symbolic of the apparently major stylistic change that has had the first game's avid fans up in arms. *The Sands Of Time* won so many hearts in part because its looks and atmosphere were like no other videogame's: dreamlike, decadent, sexual, and yes, Arabian (not to say Islamic), all perfectly encapsulated in the romantic promise of that gorgeous title screen. *Warrior Within*'s title screen is a desolate, rubble-strewn corridor. Its soundtrack is strident nu-metal. Its architecture is Gothic. Its tone is bleak, harsh, violent, and profoundly western (not to say American). It looks and sounds and feels exactly like every other videogame.



Well, no. You may well groan at the scars and the stubble and the S&M costumes, swear your way through the graceless combat tutorial that kicks the game off, and cringe at the underweight crunch of those Linkin Park riffs or the portentous cliché of the storytelling (the Prince must travel back in time to stop the sands being made, and thus avoid his own fated death). But once you're done mourning your Errol Flynn fantasies and have sunk your teeth into the red-raw meat of *Warrior Within*, you realise that under the pallid skin it resembles no other videogame so much as *The Sands Of Time*. And that can hardly be a bad thing.

The instinctive, fluid, acrobatic platforming is still there, still in copious quantities, and still a mesmerising, liberating joy. It's broken up into slightly smaller pieces, and perhaps a little less cerebral, but the admittedly minor additions (use of ropes on walls, and the ability to slide down banners,

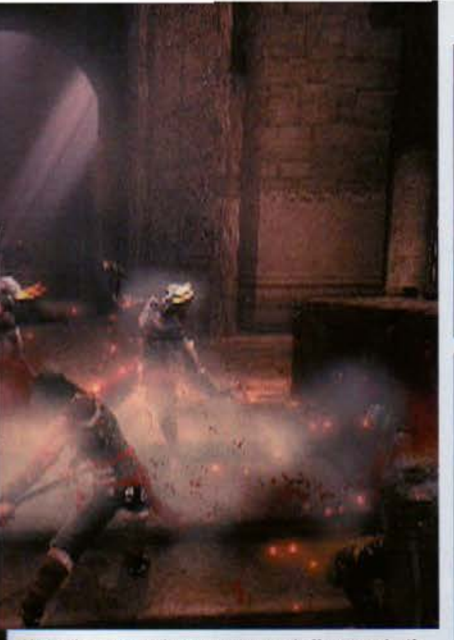


The combat expansion brings with it a new grace, as well as a gigantic moves list. The Prince can, mid-flip, choose to launch off a wall and propel himself at another enemy





Even though the game no longer hinges on the contrast between water and sand, a cool drink still refills your health. It won't, however, wash the grim scowl off the Prince's face



The copious sprays of gore can be turned off. We wonder if this option will be used more to protect the innocence of children, or the sensibilities of ageing fans. We'd rather have had an opportunity to silence the Prince's inane trash-talk





Enemy weapons can be seized for this season's must-add feature, dual wielding: it's empowering, but a little too easy to accidentally fling your off-weapon away







which some may remember from demos of *The Sands Of Time*) are welcome. The gigantic mechanical puzzles are still there, slightly undernourished, but still satisfying in their weight and symmetry. The time powers are still there, still impressive in their implementation, and still a heaven-sent revolution of the instant-death platform game (although they are now much less important in combat).

Also present and correct are the gloriously clutter-free interface with its disappearing readouts, and one of the original's greatest (if embryonic) achievements – the camera. Where virtually every other thirdperson game struggles just to show the pertinent action, *Warrior Within* not only portrays it with near-infallible clarity, but finds and seamlessly switches between dizzying long-shots and skewed, fish-eyed angles that highlight the scale, drama and daring of the Prince's adventure. This camera has art where others have mere competence at best, and it's not at the cost of player control either. There's sound technology behind this approach, but also painstaking planning, hard work and a good eye.

Perhaps most surprisingly, this is still a profoundly beautiful game, albeit more conventionally so. The architecture has genuine majesty and is in a state of convincingly organic ruin (in the present, at least). The textures of fabric, vegetation, and stone are astonishingly lifelike, and even the radiant shafts of light seem tangible. Depth of field, elevation, and the impressive size of the environments are all powerfully conveyed. But the cost, in terms of a stuttering framerate, is dear. And so to the most contentious, substantive change (and even this has been overstated): the combat. The fears – or hopes – inspired by the intense pre-release focus on this aspect of the game were largely unfounded. It does not usurp platforming's rightful place at the game's heart. The complexity implied by pages upon pages of combos with names like Furious Tempest Of Agony is entirely illusory, for these are little more than fodder for random, button-mashing spectacle. Cherry-picking from the Prince's offensive moves means the combat loses some of its instinctive precision, but brings welcome variety and undeniable satisfaction to the ceaseless skirmishing.



Once you've sunk your teeth into the red-raw meat of Warrior Within, you realise that it resembles no other videogame so much as The Sands Of Time

And ceaseless is the word. There is a lot more fighting, indeed, too much. But you are seldom ranged against more than a handful of opponents at a time, and never face the tedious, dispiriting, respawning hordes that dragged the freewheeling *Sands Of Time* to its knees. In *Warrior Within*, combat frequently punctuates the smooth acrobatic flow of the game, rather than occasionally bringing it to a choking halt. It is, overall, a considerable improvement, perhaps the only one in this sequel. The extent of the backtracking, though, is almost unforgivable in what is essentially a purely linear adventure, and feels like a cheap and unnecessary tactic for extending the game's playing time.



When retrying a section, previously unskippable cut-scenes can be fast-forwarded in a manner that's as strikingly pretty as it is convenient. It's one time power we wish more games could be bothered to master

Ubisoft has taken a flawed game of boundless promise, destroyed some (but not all) of its appeal, fixed some (but not enough) of its problems, and jeopardised the whole endeavour by making the same mistake twice and rushing it to market before it was steady on its feet. *Prince Of Persia* is strong and supple enough to survive this with many of its immense virtues intact. But it deserved so much better. **[7]**



GOLDENEYE: ROGUE AGENT

FORMAT: GC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40
RELEASE: NOVEMBER 26 (PS2, XBOX), DECEMBER 3 (GC)
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E141

Players galore



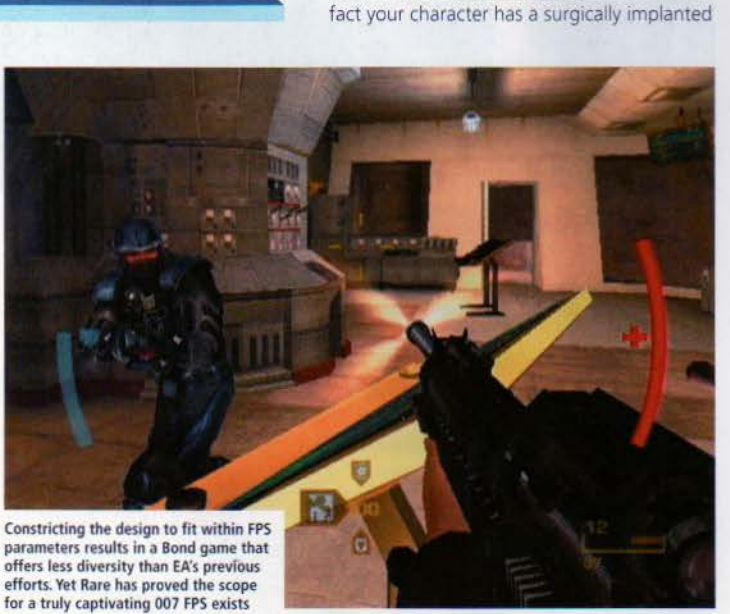
Rogue Agent offers splitscreen fourplayer, system link and Live multiplayer opportunities. The action is suitably energetic and in addition to levels found in the singleplayer game, other locations make an appearance (such as the pyramids, Atlantis and a selection from the Moonraker set). As in the main game, certain aspects of the environment are interactive (eg the trapdoors on the Golden Gate Bridge map) which throw an additional element into the otherwise arsenal-fixated mix. Play options include limited variations on the deathmatch theme and, while unlikely to save *Rogue Agent* from mediocrity, they do provide an enjoyable diversion to the main game.

Going where no previous James Bond game has dared to tread," says the press release. "*GoldenEye: Rogue Agent* (...) breaks all the rules by transporting players to the dark side of the Bond universe to experience life as a high-rolling, cold-hearted villain." It's a redundant, utterly wasted twist. For all the difference it makes in terms of the play experience – which sees you on Goldfinger's payroll against Dr No's empire of evil – it may as well be business as usual. The real development, the brave development, would have been to have you face off against MI6, against the 'good guys'. But EA doesn't do risqué, of course.

It's difficult not to be cynical about *Rogue Agent* because so much of the game has clearly been constructed in calculated fashion, as though a short-sighted marketing department was placed in charge of design. From the very opening moments, the game shamelessly borrows elements of past successful firstperson shooters (in this particular case, *Halo*'s in-game realtime y-axis preference settings, though you'll soon note Bungie's novel energy system has also clearly impressed EA's minions). Then there's the name and the preposterous association – the fact your character has a surgically implanted 'golden eye' – with one of the finest FPS titles ever created, whose lofty standing among videogamers EA is blatantly assuming will help boost *Rogue Agent*'s profile.

Still, the prosthetic organ does at least allow for the game's only real distinct element. Upgraded alongside your progress, it endows your character with gameplay enhancements such as x-ray vision, EMP pulses (to disable weapons or remote hack machinery), shield or magnetic field disruption (think telekinetic displacement). How well these work in practice is mostly a matter of personal preference – certainly their diversity makes it possible for players to adopt individual strategies depending on play style. What it won't do is hide the limited and predictable behaviour of the enemies; the way the action is organised into set-pieces with every attack pre-scripted, thus destroying the possibility for organic play; or the fact other than on the rarest of occasions, levels tend to be excessively long, linear, repetitive and, though set in suitably internationally varied locations, clichéd.

And yet, moments of tension exist. There is some enjoyment to be had from crouching behind a crate and picking off the opposition through a relentless hail of bullets, or working out one of the many opportunities the game gives you for conveniently utilising the environment against the opposition, or throwing a guard over the side of the Hoover Dam once you're done using his body as a shield. But nothing that you haven't necessarily been able to do in countless other FPSs, of course. And that's the problem. *Rogue Agent* is the result of design by committee: a safe, reasonably accomplished but uninspiring offering which neither excels nor progresses its genre in any way. **[5]**



Constricting the design to fit within FPS parameters results in a Bond game that offers less diversity than EA's previous efforts. Yet Rare has proved the scope for a truly captivating 007 FPS exists



While you're rewarded for 'perfect shots' (head hits), the excessive innacuracy of some of the weapons makes this something of a lottery. It also ensures you waste a phenomenal amount of bullets



In the interest of balance each of your golden eye's combat properties (above) runs on a limited energy supply and functions for either a handful of seconds or a couple of uses. The gauge replenishes whenever your eye is not activated



The dual weapon system allows players to wield an arsenal that best suits their tactics. Larger examples such as the assault and sniper rifles, railgun or rocket launcher require the use of both hands



Enemies are predictable but remain ruthless – grab one of them to use as a shield and they'll carry on shooting



TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON 2

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: RED STORM ENTERTAINMENT
PREVIOUSLY IN: E142

Everyone remembers their first online *Ghost Recon* experience. Whether it was executing a precise head-shot at over 200 yards while crouched in a shrub or madly charging through the corridors of the training map with an M16, it was Xbox Live's first triumph, and for many, their inaugural introduction to the singular charms of online multiplayer gaming. But just a couple of months after release something odd happened. People started getting mean.

Coming up against obsessives who knew every square inch of every map was one thing, but there were also those who exploited bugs in the game to their advantage. In the online space spoiling others' fun to gain cheap victories is common, but what *Ghost Recon* couldn't do was compensate those with a will to learn with an engaging singleplayer campaign – and it's here where *Ghost Recon 2* outclasses the original.

It's North Korea in the near future, and a military coup has destabilised the country and precipitated a famine. Enter the Ghost squad, a crack US military team that works alongside international forces to rid the world of despots and terrorist threats. While the politics are dodgy and the cut-scenes glib, the missions are at least varied and the locales picturesque.

Indeed, the barren *Ghost Recon* universe has been considerably enhanced. Gone are the shuffling zombies from the original game replaced with enemies that run, retreat, take cover, charge when you're vulnerable and generally act in a believable manner. The spell might not be totally convincing on the normal difficulty setting, but turn it up to hard and you're in for a very challenging and energetic campaign. Yet it's bemusing to discover that you're able to quicksave at any point during a mission, a short-sighted design decision that encourages players to exit into a menu every few seconds. Three or four saves per mission, or checkpoints, would have made the thrill of victory far more intense without invoking infuriation.

Red Storm has also introduced Havok-powered physics into these new battle arenas, but it's not as complete or convincing as we'd hoped. Vehicles still trundle around on pre-ordained paths, and while a rocket might explode into one, transforming it into a twisted metal sculpture, it'll remain rooted to the spot. Gun emplacements are also a new addition (activated by pressing in the left analogue stick) and are useful for taking out rogue helicopters or streams of enemy soldiers advancing on your position. But such toys have been a staple of other war games for years. It's *Ghost Recon 2*'s precision and detail that lifts it above the raft of mediocre combat titles out there. From accurate fire rates to authentic hand signals used to issue commands, it oozes care and research.

Unquestionably, *Ghost Recon 2* is a more well-rounded and intense experience than before, but despite some beautiful locations and powerful sound effects it still errs on the side of cold simulation rather than an emotional and dramatic war experience. But that's exactly what some people want. **[7]**





Tanks and APCs are not nearly as terrifying as they look. Their movements are pre-scripted and once nearby troops have been eliminated a rocket or bomb is enough to take them out



In Lone Wolf mode you must complete the campaign without the help of squad members. However, you are given the nifty M29 assault rifle – an invention that lets you shoot round corners and zoom in on the enemy



Ammo boxes will re-stock every weapon you have and it's now possible to pick up the guns dropped by dead soldiers. Wasting your rockets is not advised as they're often required to take out objective-specific targets





If any of your team go down in a battle you have a few seconds to administer medical aid to them. Simply get close, then press in the left analogue stick to heal their wounds. You do leave yourself open to attack while doing this, however

Live a little



At the time of writing, the *Ghost Recon 2* lobbies are not jammed enough for us to give you a comprehensive appraisal of the multiplayer experience. However, the original game's atrocious menus, Friends options and voice communication problems have been considerably improved while the new maps are even better. In online co-op it's possible to play standard missions or defend bases from streams of enemies converging on your position, making for very tense encounters. Given both Red Storm and Ubisoft's commitment and expertise in the online arena, we fully expect *Ghost Recon 2* to eclipse the excellence of the series' first Xbox Live enabled title.





Early in the game you assemble a four-man squad, with levels skewing slightly depending on the soldier you choose to control. Only Luger the assassin offers a markedly different play experience, with alternate lone wolf level routes, heat-sensitive vision and a viciously accurate long-range automatic pistol

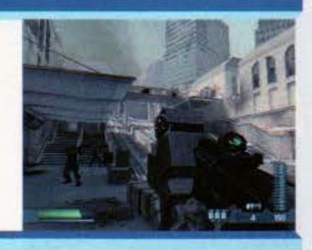


KILLZONE

FORMAT: **PS2** PRICE: **£40** RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 26**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE** DEVELOPER: **GUERRILLA**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E127, E132, E135, E138, E142**



Killing with company

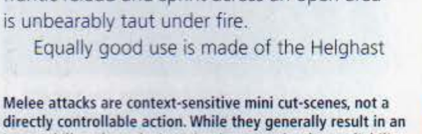


The multiplayer component at least provides a chance to make a few Helghast troopers behave in a more believable fashion, and the selection of maps – also revisiting some of the best urban locales from the main game – lend themselves well to ambushes and magazine-burning stand-offs. But the lumbering movement and control, both intentional and from the game's random clumsinesses, means there's little sense of finesse or skill: just ugly, confused warfare until the last man stands. It's perhaps an area where the game's dour pseudo-realism could have been slightly relaxed.

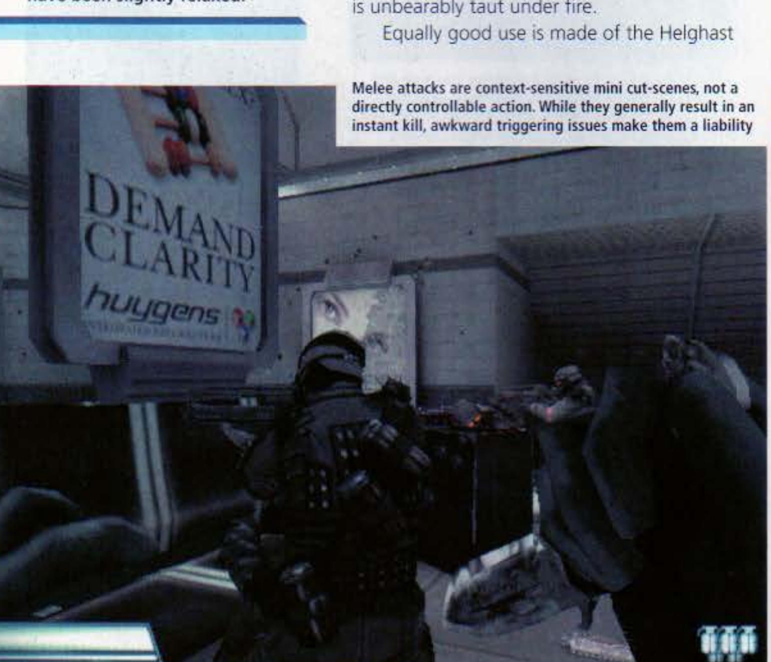
By now, Guerrilla may wish the war between the ISA and the Helghast was the only conflict *Killzone* was concerned with. Entering the most vicious November chart battle yet and set to take a bullet for the system rivalry cause, its original intent – to create an epic shooter for a system historically lacking one – has been submerged beneath a swell of anticipation it was never clear the developer could match.

If such doubts were grounded by the substandard *ShellShock*, they're amplified by *Killzone*'s opening battlegrounds. Inflexible and obvious, as if some dystopian bonus stage from a recent *Medal Of Honor*, they're far removed from the urgent urban warfare that was hoped for. Sleepwalk through them into the ballistic hide-and-seek of the interior levels, though, and *Killzone* finds its form as an unplugged lightgun shooter, a derailed *Virtua Cop* – perhaps explaining the loving fetishisation of your arsenal. Accompanied by the game's ponderous gravity, each heart-stopping click on an empty chamber, frantic reload and sprint across an open area is unbearably taut under fire.

Equally good use is made of the Helghast stormtroopers' striking imagery in the claustrophobia of these shootouts, but as the battle rages out of the warrens into open country (if single-tracked open country) it becomes apparent that they were best left indoors. It isn't necessarily a case of the AI, able to fight itself so well in the game's early media exposure, being lacking. Retreat from an entrenched encounter, and a Helghast platoon can stalk you across half the map with military precision. But in the immediacy of a firefight they dither – too unnaturally slow to prioritise threats, too unconvincing in their delayed responses. This renders them not just cannon fodder, but stooges; instilling no sense of threat, just the half-expectation that one will make a comedy pratfall out of the next dropship.



Melee attacks are context-sensitive mini cut-scenes, not a directly controllable action. While they generally result in an instant kill, awkward triggering issues make them a liability







The damage is more than atmosphere deep: without the suspension of disbelief that a truly menacing Helghast front could have provided, the game's inconsistencies are laid bare. Level length and forethought of checkpoint placement is erratic, quickly wearing thin on repeated attempts. And repetition is inevitable when faced with absurdly excessive falling damage, fatally unreliable context-sensitive actions for vaulting barricades or melee attacks, and the sense that surviving some set-pieces on a first attempt is a matter of chance, not skill. While there is scope for each skirmish to play out differently, it's simpler to respond in kind to cheap deaths by lobbing pre-emptive grenades into scripted entry points – and in doing so, you're not so much numbed to the shock of *Killzone*'s war as anaesthetised.

For a title so convinced of its epic significance, it's damning that the overall experience is such a hollow one: all sound, fury and unfulfilled potential. In the penultimate battle, one character opines that even if you triumph it will be a meaningless victory. You may be inclined to agree. **[6]**



THE GETAWAY: BLACK MONDAY

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (TEAM SOHO)
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138

Six 'fucks' in the opening cut-scene set the tone for a game that's desperate to appear edgy, uniquely British and grown up. But as you watch the cut-scenes roll by with something approaching incredulity, it increasingly starts to feel like an episode of The Bill directed by Michael Winner. Ironically, the scripting is so desperate to be adult that it ends up sounding as mature as a teenager rebelling against school uniform.

The Getaway had its problems, but two years down the line very little has been addressed. The driving sections are as treacle slow as ever, and while there's some amusement to be got from pointing out local landmarks and chip shops it feels less like a game and more like a poorly-executed interactive map of London. More cars, pedestrians and motorcycles have been added but the world still feels dead. Missions that see you 'chasing' other vehicles can be excruciating, and unskippable mini cut-scenes leading into some pursuits add to the infuriation.

The driving sections certainly don't feel like a game, so it's dispiriting to find that the run-and-gun levels are almost as bad. It's a struggle just to manoeuvre your character through doorways and the thirdperson camera misbehaves so badly it induces motion sickness, especially in tight locations like staircases.

There's something rather charming about the gritty urban locations, the graffiti-clad council flats and dilapidated office blocks, but even if the mechanical elements worked smoothly this would still be an utterly abject experience. The driving parts are lacklustre and the shooting sections little better than a broken lightgun game. Once you learn how to roll and shoot with rhythm a kind of enjoyment emerges, but this is only possible in open areas. Hand-to-hand combat is staccato and haphazard, adding to the misery, and the implementation of movement and control is so bad that you feel like you're working against the joypad rather than with it. Poor signposting and a dumb map stretch patience even further.

We don't remember the 'c' word making it into a mainstream videogame before, but when a Latvian hoodlum lets loose with a foul-mouthed tirade it's more amusing than shocking. Having to run after him until he's subdued rather than killed is reminiscent of a Benny Hill sketch, complete with stripy sweaters and swag bags, and is perhaps the game's lowest point – though there are many contenders for this accolade.

A superb musical score and some high production values in places can't begin to unbog this from an almost unplayable mire. The only shocking thing about *Black Monday* is that it's considerably worse than the original. If it sells more copies, that would be a real crime. **[3]**



Gas cannisters can be used, but they take so long to throw that it's more productive to just run and shoot. Brief verbal instructions often tell you where to go, but they can often be misunderstood in the heat of battle.

The realistic look does not flatter *Black Monday* when any action does break out. Running over hoodlums is comical; the mixture of verbal abuse and poor ragdoll physics gives the game an unreal, anti-cinematic feel





It's possible to subdue and then handcuff your opponents if you get close enough. Sometimes this results in a tussle that leaves you open to attacks from others. The camera fails to cope with the tight interior locations

Dial-a-cliché



There are two major protagonists in *Black Monday* (though a female character also appears briefly), and both tick all the appropriate cliché boxes. Ben Mitchell is a taciturn cop, back on the beat after undergoing investigation for mistakenly shooting a kid in the back, while Eddie O'Conner is an ex-East End boxer and now a muscle for hire. Add a touch of comedy, some sheepskin jackets and a Ford Granada and you have a wonderful blend of The Sweeney and Minder. Except *Black Monday* isn't nearly intelligent enough to do pastiche. This is hackneyed scripting at its most po-faced and predictable.

Cars burst into flames if shot repeatedly, giving you seconds to escape. Should you survive, you'll often have to gun down remaining enemies. It's not sophisticated











PAPER MARIO: THE THOUSAND-YEAR DOOR

FORMAT: GC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138

THE SHOW MUST GO ON (AND ON)



***Paper Mario 2*'s fights are nominally fleeable, but in practice, evasive action usually just means postponing the inevitable for a couple of seconds. The major new feature of the sequel's turn-based battles is its audience – Star Points, the accumulation of which enables levelling-up, are won by impressing the crowd on the theatre-like battle screen. It's an appropriate setting, because the action is played for laughs, music hall-style. There are a wide range of stylish enemies, and Mario's scrollable range of familiar sidekicks provide a variety of specialist back-up for apprehending weaknesses and subsequently targeting them. Realtime elements (troublemaking audience members, blocks and attack boosts) keep the action fresh and involving.**

With the bitter debates over *Sunshine*'s place in the canon fading into distant memory and the delight that the relatively humble, handheld *Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga* inspired fresh in the mind, there were good reasons to harbour high hopes about this follow-up to the N64's *Paper Mario*. Of course, given its heritage, expectations of radical change would have been rash – and, sure enough, *The Thousand-Year Door* opens on a crisp, bright 2D world in which progress is largely linear, battles are knock-about fun, visual and musical motifs of *Mario* games past are laced through every scene, and Peach has gone and got herself kidnapped all over again.

The adventure, which takes place over seven chapters, begins with Mario's arrival in the hub-town of Rogueport, a busy, bayside outpost buzzing with small-time miscreants, talkative NPCs and opportunities for diversion. Unfortunately, the opening sections are the limpest part of the game, but happily they set neither the tone nor the aesthetic template for what follows. For beneath the city hides an ancient labyrinth which plumbs you into startling new worlds, old friends, weird creatures and genuinely fresh tasks.



Mario's sidekicks have enormous charisma, thanks to animation and smart-talking dialogue. Flurrie is a particular hit, thanks to her enormous 'stage presence'

The traditional pattern of town-then-dungeon is kept, with a boss and a star awaiting you at the end of each chapter, yet the dungeons are anything but. Old school switch puzzles give way to platforming takes on *Pikmin*. Repetitive random battles are replaced by Mario's temporary career as a prize fighter. Each new chapter is exactly that – a new adventure where you can't predict how things will look or what you'll be called upon to do.

Along the way you collect companions. Their skills help you navigate the world and are crucial in battle, where the simplistic pattern of initial encounters evolves into more epic bouts which test your tactical mettle as well as your twitch response and rhythm action skills. Each new friend enables you to backtrack if you wish, seeking out new corners which you couldn't access before and unearthing hidden badges. Also making a return are the Princess Peach interludes, now interspersed with appearances by Bowser. These were a weak aspect of the first *Paper Mario* and they're only a little stronger here, mostly thanks to the delights of commanding a rampaging, fire-belching Bowser.

Frustrating, too, are the potential sticking points – town-based puzzles which can be a little too oblique. However, one of your companions is always at the ready to be asked for a tip. Inescapable battles can also become a chore, although they give a vital chance to test out new badge combinations and hone your special attack skills.

The strength of the *Mario RPG* series has always been the convincing lunacy with which it depicts the 'ordinary' life of the Mushroom Kingdom. You may have steered Mario through some strange odd-jobs in your time, but *Paper Mario 2* is your best chance to actually be him. **[8]**





There are hidden delights tucked all over Rogueport, such as this arcade (above), complete with hidden arcade machines, run by mafioso Piantas





Initially disappointing, *Paper Mario 2* develops into a visual treat. As well as worlds which look like nothing videogames have ever imagined before, Mario can also play tricks, nipping into the background scenery to find items and shortcuts



SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: NOCTURNE

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£27) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: ATLUS USA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (ATLUS R&D 1)
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138





The imposing interiors, bleached with ghostly filter effects, are as unique and striking as the character design

Twenty minutes into *Nocturne*, the world ends. It's indicative of the game's unique atmosphere that this is most memorable for having a fellow human being to hold your hand, though not to fully explain your role in the glacially cool afterlife that follows.

You're reborn alone in a world of Zen garden deserts, fractured moments of Tokyo cityscape and demons – nearly all of whom are prospective companions as well as enemies. Once recruited, seduced or bribed into the party they can evolve alongside you or be crossbred with others to leap up the demon hierarchy: *Pokémon* with Tarot cards.

Though its looks and theme are (post)modern, the game itself is as classic as its mythological influences or the series' lengthy history: a mantra of grid-based dungeon crawls and relentless random encounters. Their frequency is a necessary evil to develop your party and audition new members – and nearly excused from exasperation by smart combat mechanics that drastically cut downtime when using effective tactics. Scoring critical hits or using attacks that exploit an opponent's weakness earn extra actions; conversely, misses or attacks resisted by an opponent's strengths deduct them. Battles then become a tug-of-war for the chance to press an advantage, not a politely-disciplined exchange of blows.

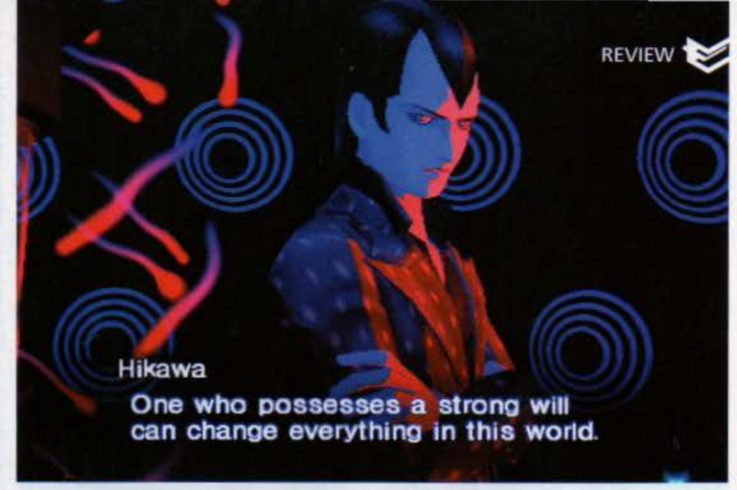
Even so, this can't help the constant war of attrition overstaying its welcome in *Nocturne*'s eerier moments, where the effect is of channel-surfing between frozen dread and frenzied action, nor in the marathon dungeons of the second half, where each encounter inexorably chips – or occasionally gouges – away at your chances of overcoming the resident boss.

Not that the bosses require that much assistance, as many can destroy an unprepared party in a single disastrous turn. Such spirit-crushing defeats are made more bearable by the method required to respond to them: recruiting new demonic blood is often the answer rather than power-levelling, ensuring your character and party never lock into a one-strategy groove.

In this respect, *Nocturne* is as progressive and thoughtful as Nippon Ichi's strategy masterclasses. It's an introspective RPG not just in theme, but in the outlay of time and thought it asks of the player to make sense of what's otherwise a cosmically unfair challenge. It's a work of art, but one on such a dauntingly high pillar that only the most dedicated will appreciate it to the full. **[7]**



Your allies can learn new skills, but the most customisable demon of all is your character, able to adapt to any kind of physical, magical or supporting role





Nocturne's pivotal moral choices are less numerous than those of *KOTOR* or *Fable*, but more profound: there's no 'good' or 'evil', just different ideologies

Maniacs street preachers



The US release includes the Japanese *Maniacs* expansion, adding a new super-dungeon and extra boss showdowns. The first of these bosses provides a rude awakening to the brutality of the game's combat system, proving near-insurmountable to a first-time party, but further *Maniacs* bosses are both optional and slightly less ruthless. *Devil May Cry* fans may be saddened to note that the guest-appearing Dante is, in comparison, a pushover – if a scenery-chewing, exhilaratingly showy one.





RATCHET & CLANK 3

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: INSOMNIAC GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138

Unlike its predecessor, *Ratchet & Clank 3* isn't more of the same, it's less of the same. Most of the platforming gristle has been trimmed away, so there's less preoccupation with making the player double-jump through hoops, a preoccupation seemingly designed to break up the frenzy of gunplay, but, which in practice, diluted the whole experience.

Instead, what we have now is the videogame equivalent of a gun barrel: well-oiled, unwavering, single-purpose and designed to hit the player in the face with explosive force, leaving an exit wound the size of a big stupid smile. It's a thirdperson shooter that hits the ground running and firing furiously and, unlike previous *Ratchet* games, never lulls or settles down. The very first level throws you up against the kind of towering, stomping threats that previous *Ratchet* games would keep hidden until their latter stages. Obviously, Ratchet's arsenal is now even more murderously sawn-off, featuring deafening fire-and-forget hand cannons that each have their own quirks, ideal applications and brutal sound effects.

As soon as the instructive opening levels are done with, it's on to a string of strong, bedazzling set-pieces; numerous pseudo-team deathmatch skirmishes; the gladiatorial showdowns and hazardous Deathcourses of the Annihilation Station; navigating a series of tunnels that feel more like being attacked by *Frequency* than anything else. There's also what is possibly the first ever boss battle set in a pop video, as the player battles evil robobabe Courtney Gears – pulsing pink strobes, dance podiums, murderous cyborg backing dancers and all.

Weapon selection now seamlessly includes two weapon wheels instead of one, ammo can be completely replenished in a single purchase, and all the fiddly, functional gadgets – the grappling hook, the hacking tool – have been condensed into one. And then there are myriad distractions: optional side missions and endurance battles, Captain Quark's 2D Vid Comic stages, trophies and crystals to hunt, skill points and titanium bolts to earn. It's a package that feels as complete as it does technically brilliant, the product of a dev team working at its confident, relaxed and refined best.

However, Clank's solo sections – where the diminutive robot solves straightforward puzzles – are as depressingly simple and galling as they've ever been. It's also arguably a little too easy. Once you've got a few fully-powered guns to draw, there's little that the game can throw at you that can't be cut down within seconds, but those seconds are satisfying, breathtaking, intense, hyperactive, and thrilling nonetheless. It's not as acidly funny as, say, *Metal Arms* either, but it is far less frayed around the edges. It's taken two near-miss games to get here, but Insomniac has finally nailed the art of war, lock, stock and around 20 smoking barrels. **[8]**

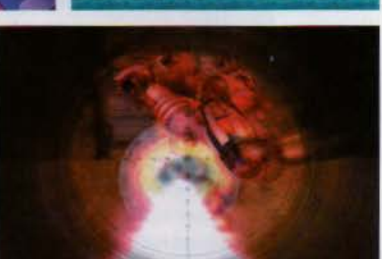


Both twin-stick thirdperson controls and a firstperson option are now available from the off, cementing the game's core concern as an accomplished shoot 'em up



The humour of *Ratchet & Clank* games has always been consciously zany, and a little too reserved with it, but Britney Spears-a-like Courtney Gears is one of many well-fleshed lampoons. It seems the series has finally found some strong aesthetic shoes to match its technical feat





Each of your weapons can be upgraded through five levels of power with repeated use. The fifth and final level usually sees the weapon evolving significantly, with a new name and function; the sniper rifle, for example, ultimately becomes the fiercely-powerful Spitter

Ratchet & seven others



As well as splitscreen support for four players, the game allows online battling for up to eight. In addition to standard deathmatch and capture the flag modes, teams can also attempt to capture one another's bases by taking out their defences. Strategic waypoints can be activated by using Ratchet's wrench to screw in a large bolt; it's a move that takes several seconds, and leaves you open to fire, but will result in a spawn point for your team, as well as access to vehicles, weapons and other supplies.



Find an alien costume, and you can breach the intergalactic language barrier, making use of rhythm action to convince sentries to allow you access to further areas of the game. Another hacking sub-game makes a return, in a typically bewildering but addictive fashion





Though the game opens in the desert, a return to the city is inevitable. Certain sections look a little different now (left). Daxter on a rocket (above) is almost challenging



JAK 3

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: NAUGHTY DOG
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138







As before, you occasionally have to assume control of Daxter (top). This time, however, such challenges are child's play. The long-range rifle is good for general combat, and its aiming has a specialist use, too (above)



There are several winks to other games, including *Prince Of Persia* and a certain firstperson shooter on a certain non-Sony console. Attention to detail throughout is excellent – there's even an unlockable commentary track

When Californian studio Naughty Dog veered off from the 3D platformer path and into *GTA* territory with its second *Jak* game, it made at least two significant mistakes. First, it thought buzzing around a cityscape in hovercars would be as much fun as hammering around streets in cars (it wasn't – by a yawning margin), and second, it failed to thoroughly playtest its work, resulting in a selection of missions so frustrating in their make-up only the masochistic could find them pleasurable.

Both mistakes have been addressed in this sequel. Though the second game's airborne vehicles make a reappearance (part of the adventure takes place in the old city, now partly ruined thanks to the ongoing war), you spend much more off-foot time romping across desert wastes in a series of splendidly rugged buggies. Such missions involve collecting artefacts, car combat and other pursuits, often against the clock, and prove to be truly worthwhile developments beyond the game's run-and-gun core. And, like the rest of the game, they're never stupidly difficult or drawn out. In fact, if you managed to grind and grimace your way through the previous *Jak*, this instalment will be a pushover. (It's almost as if Naughty Dog has readied its title for the new wave of very young gamers who'll be receiving PS2s on December 25.)

But *Jak 3*'s not easy via familiarity; you do not succeed simply by repeating actions over and over to become good at them. Quite the contrary: this is a game that falls over itself to offer up a new twist or turn at every opportunity. Not every style of play is a success, and some variants are under-utilised (a gliding level is over and done with before it really has a chance to get going, for instance), but together the variety of challenges serves as a selection box, albeit one you must consume in a fairly strict order.



The city's shooting range (above) is still open for business, although the rewards are more considerable this time around. Naughty Dog has continued to look to the *Ratchet & Clank* series: the weapons here look and feel much meatier than before. Getting to control a robotic walker (left) via a remote device allows you to really rip into the city's intruders, although the fun is shortlived

Technically, *Jak 3* is Naughty Dog doing what it does best: big, solid worlds filled with big, solid enemies. Artistically, it's all those familiar long-ears-and-big-eyes characters and slick cut-scenes dominated by Daxter's increasingly tiresome sidekick schtick. Story-wise, there's the usual series mumbo-jumbo, plus a couple of surprises for those who've followed the previous two games.

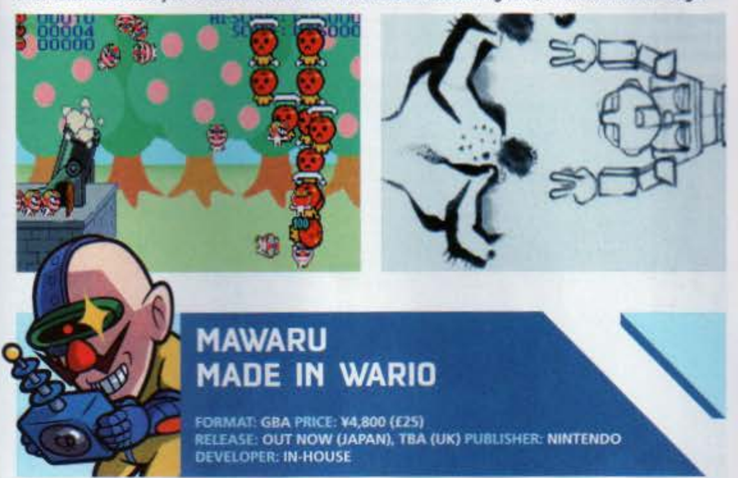
So it's all down to how it hangs together to play. Jak's new light form definitely adds more to the experience than his previously explored dark alter ego – indeed, you're forced to use it in certain places, rather than keeping it as a backup plan for when things get particularly hairy – and the variety of gameplay styles is a genuine achievement. But, even at its most challenging, and with its countless attempts to innovate, *Jak 3* too often feels like you're merely going through the motions. As the series' conclusion, then, it's a mild disappointment. **[6]**

Buggy boy



Taking each of the dune buggies for a spin proves to be one of the game's highlights because the desert sections are not simply bolted on to the game but properly realised from the ground up: the physics system feels satisfyingly weighty, the onboard weapons are punchy, and the terrain is interesting enough to make you want to explore it. The most fun to be had here, though, is with the model featuring hydraulic suspension which allows you to make enormous, strangely addictive hops around the landscape with a flick of L1.

As is traditional, all the games – even the nose-poking boss battle – become available as high score endurance tests once you've beaten them. Also included are bonus minigames, which last a little longer



MAWARU MADE IN WARIO

FORMAT: GBA PRICE: ¥4,800 (£25)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK) PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

It's all about the games', that's the handheld mantra at the moment. As old masters and new pretenders enter the arena with strange new bits of kit, it's the hope most often voiced by cautious game fans and the smarmy reassurance most often trotted out by marketing execs. The new *Made In Wario*, which takes the raw gaming essence of the first game and adds the new twist of a motion-sensitive cartridge, ought to be the perfect expression of that mantra. But instead, what *Mawaru* proves is that it's all about the everything.

It's all about the aesthetics: the packaging, which is a masterclass in both branding and detailed, affectionate artistry. The presentation of the game, a ramshackle absurdity of 8bit nostalgia, Woman's Own photo montage, deranged scribbles and creamy 2D illustrations which work together to give the game as coherent a visual identity as *Killzone*'s muted hues.

It's all about the hardware: *Mawaru*'s handsome, rugged twist detector is almost faultless. Sensitive and reliable, it gives a tiny tug of rumble as you turn your GBA, providing vital feedback and making the game come alive in your hands. Nintendo's earlier efforts – notably *Kirby's Tilt'n'Tumble* – feel shoddy by comparison.

It's all about the subtext: where the first *Made In Wario* raided 25 years of gaming consciousness, *Mawaru* has started to draw on its own bizarre heritage. Games familiar from the previous versions reappear, wonderfully warped for the twisted new world they now inhabit. More likely to be overlooked is what *Mawaru* shows about games' ability to 'do' story. Rather than copying literary or cinematic traditions, *Mawaru* tells its tiny stories in two-second spurts of observation, extrapolation and interaction.

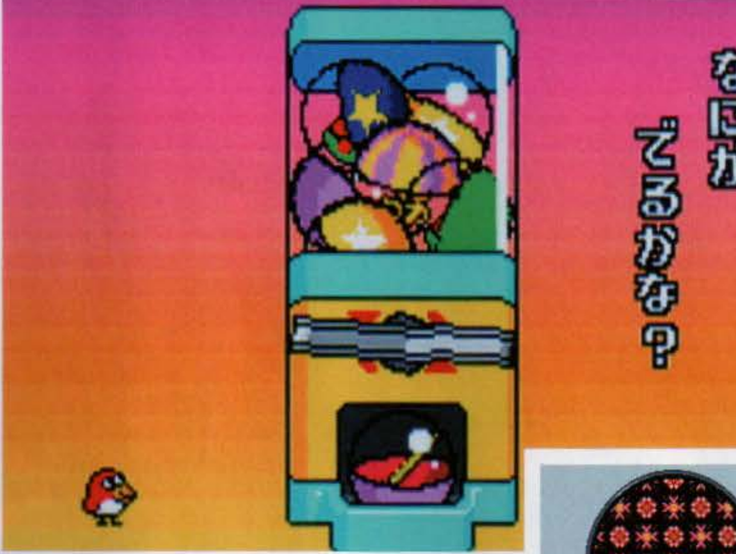
It's all about the extras: the wind-up toys and kaleidoscopes you unlock as you go. Finding a record by the Super Mario Bros you have to twist round and round to play may only be a momentary diversion, but that doesn't dilute the value of the brief, fierce thrill.

And yes, it's all about the games. From start to finish you'll never touch the D-pad. Twisting and turning, first carefully then wildly, *Mawaru*'s ludicrous tasks contort your limbs as much as your grin. Forget Havok, this is physics-based play where you're the rag-doll.

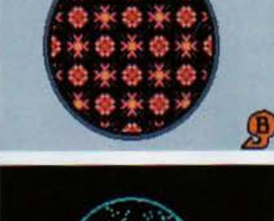
Mawaru faces two problems. It simply can't be as groundbreaking as the first *Made In Wario*, and there is consequently a sense of déjà-vu which was entirely lacking in the original. The physical input, while adding a frantic immediacy and accessibility, also makes more apparent the repetitive nature of many of the games. They may be skinned in extraordinary and unpredictable settings, but the identical jerks and swivels they all require make it harder to ignore how well the game works as a Pavlovian training device. It matters little. If this is the benchmark the next generation of handheld devices aim for, then we're in for a very fine few years. **[8]**



Some games communicate how you need to turn very clearly, others will take a few rounds of trial and error







Successfully complete each character's challenges and you're rewarded with a capsule toy. Some, like this snowglobe, will only amuse you for a second or two



Some games are worth playing badly just to see what happens when you lose. Mess up the timing on Mario and Wario's brotherly high five, and they fade to grey and crack apart. Maybe they can make up at the kart track

The kinstones drive the subquests in *The Minish Cap*; find and fuse matching pieces with another Hyrule resident and 'something good might happen'. It's a transparent device, but it works far better than the fussy and pointless ring system of the *Oracles* games





THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE MINISH CAP

FORMAT: GBA PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: CAPCOM
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138

There is no other videogame series quite as established as *Zelda*: be it in the loyalty the games inspire worldwide or in the very structure and substance of these sprawling, bewitching clockwork fairytales. Other franchises may have traditions, but *Zelda* is one: like the ancient oral sagas it draws on, it is the same tale endlessly retold, referencing only itself, embellishing and growing its teeming worlds with each telling, seldom straying far from the perfect, inviolate rulebook at its heart.

Nintendo's faith in that rulebook is such that it deputised Capcom to produce the *Oracles* diptych on the Game Boy Color, and now this new GBA adventure. After all, the *Zelda* formula is so refined and reliable that the games almost make themselves, especially in 2D. But there are diminishing returns implicit in that, and indeed the *Oracles*' slavish observance rang hollow. *The Minish Cap*, though far from the radical revisionism of the brilliant *Four Swords* or *Majora's Mask*, is a much more confident effort, with a style and soul of its own.

Much of that is drawn from the simply irresistible hook: on this quest to rescue the Princess (a secondary spur to the desire to uncover every mystery in the land), Link can shrink. With the help of his chatty enchanted hat, Ezlo, he can explore the secret worlds of the tiny Minish people, battling bugs and slugs, or crawl across human-scale Hyrule as an adorably animated dot.

Whilst this miniaturisation lends the game much of its storybook charm, the promise of a gaming Gulliver as intricate and befuddling as those famous light and dark worlds remains, sadly, unfulfilled. It's only when dodging behind the skirting of Hyrule Town that it seems to offer more than yet another disguised set of locks and keys. In the end, *The Minish Cap*'s most artful riddles are inspired not by its chief novelty, but by one of its countless borrowings from previous *Zeldas* (which we'll leave an unspoiled delight here): a brilliantly implemented lift from a most unlikely source.

It would be easy to take *The Minish Cap* for granted, left as it is with little to do but shuffle and tinker with its immaculate heritage. That, however, would be a grave mistake. Faith is rewarded when this initially modest game comes into its own late on, particularly in one dungeon of such airy, vertiginous genius that the word 'dungeon' seems quite inappropriate.

The luxurious quantity and quality of this game is almost unprecedented on a handheld system, from the innumerable bustling cartoons to the rich audio, from the meticulous design to the vast depth, breadth and length of the challenge. After tens of hours of play, the wellspring of love, craftsmanship and invention poured into *The Minish Cap* simply refuses to run dry. Maybe you can't go wrong with the *Zelda* template, but they haven't always gone this right. **[8]**







Heavily influenced by *The Wind Waker*, but with a slightly softer cartoon style, the sumptuous visuals are a timely overhaul of *Zelda*'s well-worn 2D iconography



Link's inventory is the usual mix of new and old. The gust jar, a vacuum cleaner by any other name, is the best new item. Hilarious in battle, you really don't need to think for too long to see its inherent possibilities, and neither did *The Minish Cap*'s designers



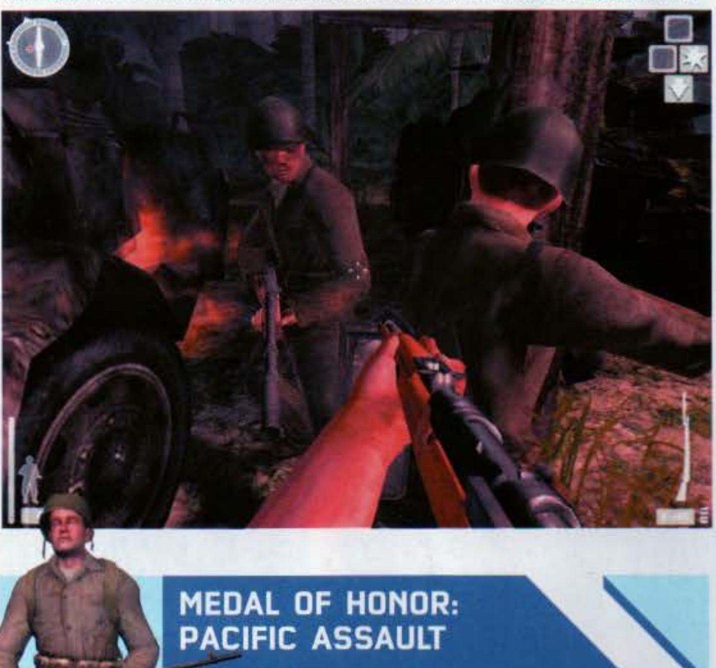
The Minish cap is more than just a big nagging mouth. As well as allowing you to shrink it can also act as a hot air balloon. Catch an updraft and you can float to new areas

Small talk



One of the chief pleasures of any *Zelda* game is its dialogue (or monologue, since Link has always been a very mute mouthpiece for the player). *Minish Cap*'s writing initially seems a touch gauche and simplistic, but a little time spent in Hyrule Town reveals some lovely, affectionate satire of human frailties: the idle, hobbyist mayor with his undeserved lakeside retreat, or the hysterically cheery woman who sits in the café drinking 'milk' without pause and doesn't want to think about what to make for dinner. Such worldly honesty and lack of condescension are nothing short of wonderful in a videogame that will be played by hundreds of thousands of children.

Only two weapons can be carried at any one time, and for a large part of the game players will be forced to pick up and use the frustratingly slow bolt-action rifles that were in common use during World War II



MEDAL OF HONOR: PACIFIC ASSAULT

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ELECTRONIC ARTS DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Pacific Assault relies heavily on scripted events for its drama and impact. This often works admirably, but in other cases the action seems stilted and disjointed

When *Call Of Duty* arrived last year, World War II shooters had never been finer. They had found their crescendo in pitch-perfect battle-horror and brilliant setpieces, bringing all fronts of the war together in one high-intensity knapsack. *Pacific Assault* may leap for that same benchmark, but misses and comes crashing down in the boot camp mud. This latest *Medal Of Honor* game, younger cousin to last year's Activision release, lurches between extreme spectacle and the nerve-grinding tedium of quicksave attrition. For each moment that shines there are two that wobble, choke and then topple awkwardly into the trenches.

While the post-tutorial scenes at Pearl Harbour are an over-the-top Wagnerian ode to the glorious defeat of righteous heroes, the jungle sections are mired in themes that are shared by both the Pacific war theatre and badly-designed firstperson shooters: they're frustrating, repetitive and unfair. Yes, some levels are sheer Hollywood rollercoaster, but others are little more than follow-the-arrow shooting galleries. The fun has been completely drained from these sections, and the awful clipping and wanton inaccuracy of the weapons often means that key sections demand trial and error punctuated with endless battering of the quicksave key to ensure progress. Of course there *are* some nice touches to balance out these misadventures, particularly in the blurring effects of firing heavy weapons or when suffering from shellshock. And *Pacific Assault* also goes further than any previous game in conveying the sheer awfulness of being shot and then gutted by a screaming Japanese infantryman – an honestly surprising and shocking moment of violence that may lead you to expect great things. Dumb AI buddies and exasperating combat, though, will soon confound that expectation.

Both are demonstrated ably by the implementation of your squad medic, who can patch up fallen soldiers, including the player. You can call the medic over at the tap of a key, but once the process has started it cannot be interrupted. If you're being patched and an enemy charges you, bayonet at the ready, then you find you can't raise so much as a pistol to stop him. Add to these many deaths the excruciating length of the loading times and hair begins to part company with scalp.

Pacific Assault demonstrates that bewildering battle scenes are no equal to genuinely clever level design and attention to detail. It also illustrates the near-bottomless potential for World War II-based set-pieces but, crucially, it lacks the vision and sense of fluidity that the increasingly crowded PC shooter genre now demands. The bolt-action rifle games probably won't die any time soon, but this is another ugly blunder. **[5]**

Patch me up

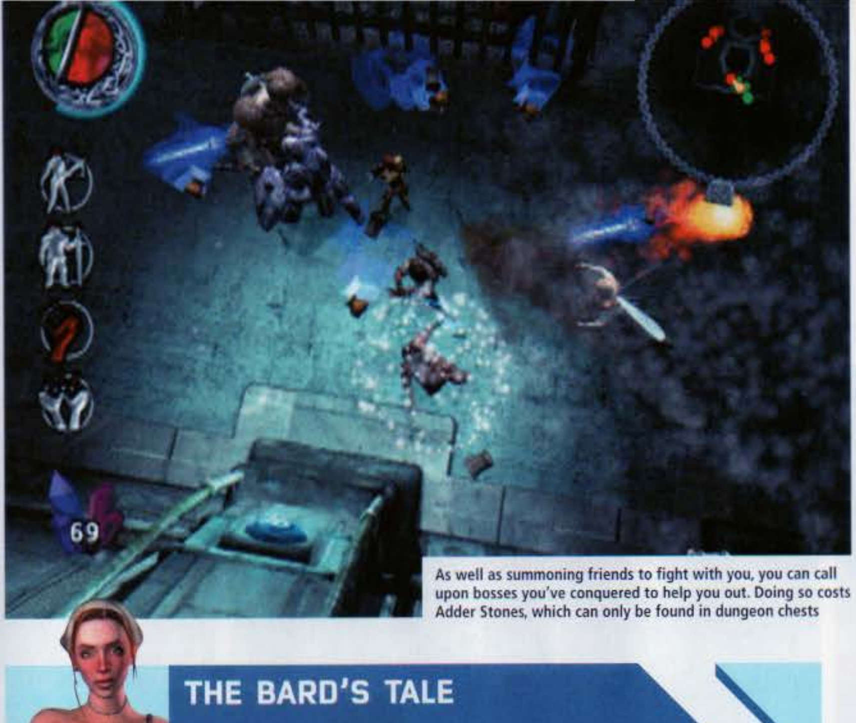


The medic proves to be both the best and worst aspect of *MOH:PA*. Best because he'll throw up after taking a look at your wounds when you're badly injured, and worst because of the way his capacity to patch you up works, or fails to, in the heat of battle. Use up his bandages and patch-up kit and you'll find yourself restarting a section, unable to defeat the enemies without it. Even more frustrating is the way the medic can still patch up your AI pals, making them practically invulnerable. It's an inconsistency that shatters any disbelief you might have otherwise suspended.



Big gun emplacements feature heavily throughout the game. Their impact has been upped a few notches with a superb reverberation blur added to the standard recoil effects we're used to





As well as summoning friends to fight with you, you can call upon bosses you've conquered to help you out. Doing so costs Adder Stones, which can only be found in dungeon chests





THE BARD'S TALE

FORMAT: PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX PRICE: $50 (£26) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK) PUBLISHER: VIVENDI DEVELOPER: INXILE PREVIOUSLY IN: E137, E143

The tale told here is a good, old-fashioned yarn – of cocky heroes, stranded princesses, evil monks and avaricious trolls. However, the far more interesting story is the one of how InXile hatched a plot to take on one of the most fiendish monsters in all of videogaming: the RPG. The plan was simple – take the robust and malleable *Dark Alliance* engine and set a dozen men to work, smashing through old conventions and crafting interesting new dynamics. And it's clear from the game that they whistled while they worked; *The Bard's Tale* is steeped in infectious enthusiasm and clear-sighted affection for the genre. Sadly, it wasn't enough, and this isn't a story that has a fairy-tale ending.

Things start very well, or rather very beautifully. The strength – and enormous frustration – of the *Dark Alliance* engine is always that it gives the false impression that the world would be every bit as detailed and beautiful up close as from your remote, top-down perspective. Into this sun-dappled paradise strolls the Bard – foul-mouthed, unprincipled, on the prowl for both kinds of booty. He sets the tone for the rest of a game which uses dry wit, broad innuendo and unexpected bouts of karaoke to lampoon RPG conventions – a pretty easy target, it must be admitted. He is soon drawn in to a tale which will take him from forest to dungeon and from weapon shop to magical tower. Suddenly things don't look so genre-busting.

InXile, of course, never set out to destroy the RPG, only re-forge it, and many of the mechanics the Bard brings with him are genuinely fresh. Himself dependent on physical attacks, he can summon a retinue of magical helpers (see Band of barders) who fight on his side until their health is exhausted. Juggling their inter-connected skills is a very different challenge from pummelling fire dragons with ice spells, and adds a real sense of scale and camaraderie to the game's battles. Their simple AI is magnificently well implemented, and they path-find and deploy themselves with predictable, reliable results.

As his story progresses, however, this initial promise becomes increasingly hamstrung. The knowing jokes about the pointlessness of RPG A-to-B-to-A quests wear bitingly thin by the time you embark on your third trek back and forth. The massed brawls, though dramatic, can become clumsy and repetitive. The Bard's best bet is all too often hanging back and firing off the screen towards the docile red dots which show on his map. There's ultimately little variation in the gameplay – and you can find yourself yearning for the change of pace that all that old-school inventory management you thought you hated could bring to this kind of game. There's also very little freedom – galling in a game which credits its players with so much intelligence.

Ultimately, setting out to critique and parody so studiously such a hidebound genre has brought *The Bard's Tale* too close to what it was trying to distance itself from. This is a conventional, likeable dungeon crawl whose flashes of brilliance distract you from its accomplishments by hinting at how much more it could have been. **[7]**





The environments differ dramatically throughout the game, from sunny glades to tortuous dungeons where blood flows from gruesome channels into deep pools where zombies have to wade their way towards you

You have no direct control over what the Bard says to the people he meets. All you can do is steer him in the right direction. Beware – trying to be nice can get you into real trouble as the Bard chooses to blab the unpalatable truth

Boss battles test your tactical skills. At times it's best to summon a support team of healers and stunners while you hack your way to victory. Sometimes it's best to hang back and let your bruisers do the job, summoning replacements whenever they bite the dust

Band of barders



The Bard must play a song to summon each of his helpers – resulting in many Benny Hill moments as he flees from a string of goblins while whipping out his lute. Picking the best combination is a subtle challenge and varies from fight to fight. The Bodyguard will block enemies as they attack, allowing the Heroine to fall back and attack with bows. Add a stunning Thunder Spider into the mix, a Crone to heal you all and an Enchantress to resurrect anyone who dies and battle becomes a complex ballet. Each has a secondary attack and all can be upgraded by finding (or stealing) new tunes.

Houses play a crucial tactical role, turning transparent as soldiers move inside them and take up position at the windows. Tank shells destroy them utterly, however, crushing whoever is inside. Trenches might be safer





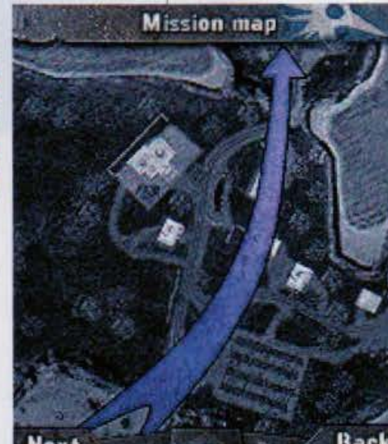




Even in multiplayer the interface stays clear. Soldiers have two active weapons, but carry alternatives. Leave a heavy weapons specialist with action points to spend and he may waste bazooka shells on infantry. Swap him to his rifle and he can defend himself until it's time to take out the tanks







This is a game with real visual flair, from the superb maps to the painted intros and extraordinary photo credits



PATHWAY TO GLORY

FORMAT: N-GAGE PRICE: £35 RELEASE: CHRISTMAS
PUBLISHER: NOKIA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (RED LYNX)
PREVIOUSLY IN: E137

Noisy chatter



***Pathway To Glory*'s N-Gage Arena wasn't open to the public at the time of this review, but test games with players in Finland, Canada and England worked flawlessly. Each player receives a steady (if slow) stream of reinforcements, which can extend the otherwise fast paced games into epics. This isn't problematic. Games remain open as long as anyone is playing, so if the original host goes through a tunnel or into a lecture, everyone else can continue playing. One of the neatest touches in multiplayer is the field radio – record a brief message for a team-mate and they'll receive it, complete with authentic hiss and crackle, at the start of their next turn.**

In the history of hardware, no console has needed the perfect synergy that firstparty software brings as badly as the N-Gage needs *Pathway To Glory*. This is Nokia's first firstparty title, in development for nearly two years, given access to every secret of the N-Gage and funded to a degree external developers must long for. It shows.

What at first sight is a muddy WWII RTS inspired by dozens of PC titles that clutter the budget shelves, reveals itself to be everything a firstparty title ought to be – an ideal gaming expression of the hardware's capabilities. It's inspired by those PC titles, without doubt, but it takes those rules and adapts them with the elegance a handheld title needs. Your squad of up to eight soldiers moves organically on the map, each step eating into their available action points. At any stage they can fire, spending extra points to up their accuracy. Any points left at the end of a turn aren't wasted. Instead, the soldiers will fire upon any enemy who crosses their line of sight. It's this choice – spend points on an aggressive advance or save them for a hostile defence – which creates the core of *Pathway*'s strategic challenge.



Multiplayer campaigns ebb and flow over a string of maps. Damage is permanent, so if you are driven back to maps you've already won you'll be faced with less cover

There would have been plentiful excuses to leave it at that – who would expect much more from a handheld? However, it doesn't stop. Soldiers carry up to four items – weapons, medikits, airstrike radios. Their stance affects their movement, their aim, their range and their defence. Each is a well-rounded individual, with a name, nationality, rank and skills. Keep them alive through the battle and they may earn a promotion and improve those skills. Lose them and they're replaced with raw recruits.

So surely, with that much depth crammed onto a small screen, the result must be dry and stat-bound? Not at all. Having a handset with so many buttons allows the controls to be streamlined, and the interface is a masterpiece of functional minimalism. *Pathway* is also surprisingly gutsy. Bullets slice the screen with a fierce, metallic whine, shells thump and rumble, tanks explode and houses collapse. The soldiers, despite their tiny size, are fully mo-capped, and each is voiced with an array of regional soundbites that are functional enough to bear being played over and over again.

But the N-Gage is still a phone, and because it's a phone, *Pathway* blossoms into something fundamentally new. Bluetooth allows local co-op and competitive matches, but the N-Gage arena enables global match-ups (see Noisy chatter) facilitated by text and voice messaging. This is world war like never before – people in parks, pubs and stations joining forces across continents. That said, it isn't inherently radical – this is an old play style re-thought and refined to perfectly exploit the N-Gage's particular strengths. There are also some gripes – movement can't be cancelled when you order it by mistake, and games can't be saved mid-mission (although they can be suspended, without any impact on your phone's functionality, for as long as your battery lasts). These aside, *Pathway* is genuinely excellent. **[8]**





KURURIN SQUASH

FORMAT: GC PRICE: ¥3,800 (£19)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK) PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: EIGHTING PREVIOUSLY IN: E142

With the ever-rising sophistication of handhelds, the console puzzle game seems doomed to die a slow, groaning death. It was a bit of a shock, then, when Eighting announced the third volume in its *Kururin* series was coming to the GameCube.

The premise of the series, for the uninitiated, is simple: Kururin, the curlicue-cowlicked aviary aviator, pilots his perpetually-spinning long-armed ship Heririn through a number of treacherous, twisting labyrinths toward a goal point. Three strikes of the ship's arms against the maze walls, or any another floating hazard, and the Heririn explodes. It's a gamer's game – all reaction time, all learning to stick and move, all about wending your way through a nest of pitfalls in a graceful arc, shaving seconds off your time.

Squash is essentially more of the same – and after two terrific prequels, that's not at all a bad thing – but Eighting has also included upgrades and modifications for the series' first console outing. In the new Action Stages, Kururin's ship is outfitted with one of a handful of weapons which, in conjunction with continuously respawning swarms of enemies, add a layer of freneticism and aggressiveness to the white-knuckled manoeuvring the game normally requires. Tucked away in the hairpin curves of the stages you'll also discover coins to spend on cosmetic upgrades.



Among the new modifications is a submarine that lets Kururin dip below the surface or rise above underwater cacti, creating dual-layer puzzles

Squash's downfall is not in anything qualitative about the gameplay itself, which remains as tight and refined as ever, it's that there just isn't enough of it. Perhaps it's simply the responsiveness that the analogue stick brings, but the dedicated will breeze through *Squash* in little time at all. Challenge mode offers dozens more levels in a race to beat a time, but all are unlocked from the start, which leaves no reward beyond the high score table. *Kururin Paradise* had 16 single- and multiplayer minigames – *Squash* brings all of two. A simplistic GBA-linked minigame, purchasable super-play videos and an after-game surprise are all very welcome additions, but no more than novelty.

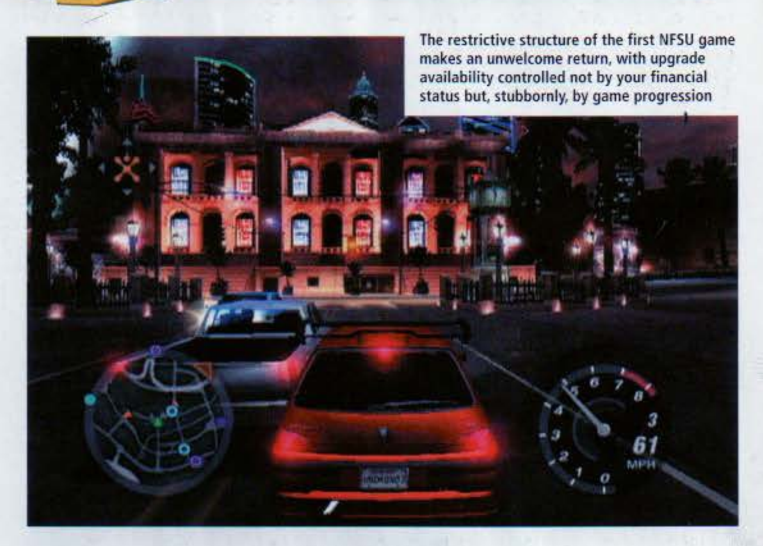
Squash easily could have been the all-singing, all-dancing triumph of the series, bringing the voluminous gameplay of the former iterations and wrapping it in a polygonal pastel candy-coat, but ends up little more than a value-priced tasty snack that'll leave you wanting more. **[6]**



Kururin Squash also has, for the first time, boss fights for each world, each utilising a different weapon from amongst Kururin's arsenal. Here, Kururin uses his boxing gloves to knock the strawberries from the boss' shortcake, while simultaneously avoiding the chocolate bars and assorted cookies being flung his way

NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND 2

FORMAT: GC, PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED)
PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (EA CANADA)


The restrictive structure of the first NFSU game makes an unwelcome return, with upgrade availability controlled not by your financial status but, stubbornly, by game progression

The reality of yearly updates is that it essentially only gives you six months' worth of concept development and, crucially, implementation. Generally, that isn't a particularly useful window in which to substantially advance a successful formula. In *NFSU2*, this shows.

Granted, the developer has introduced new elements, a free-roaming world being the most significant. Everything within the game environment – race events, tuning shops, car dealerships, even game tips – are spread around a sprawling US urban space (which opens progressively) for you to explore at your leisure. Combined with the narrative that now underpins the action (in the form of stylised, static, comic-strip sequences), the attempt at building a stronger sense of community for players to immerse themselves in is obvious, though not entirely successful. Competitors remain largely faceless, characterless entities and in this respect *Juiced* adopts a more convincing approach.

In terms of matching its rival's tuning options things look more promising, with split hoods, scissor doors and better dynamometer testing just some of the many new elements forming part of an impressively boosted list. Yet in other areas things appear stagnant, even regressive. The handling hasn't evolved and a year on, with the masking novelty of the game's tuning aspects worn off, it's disappointingly limited and remote. And despite the increased choice and plot introduction the whole exercise can often feel soulless.

Its publisher will have you believe this is the obvious racing choice for your Christmas list. But if there is any justice during the festive commercial frenzy, EA's own *Burnout 3* deserves to triumph over this entertaining though overly synthetic contender. **[6]**




The usual events return, with dedicated race tracks and narrow street circuits joining the fold. Drag courses now include more hazards, although they have inexplicably lost the excellent visual 'speed' effect that characterised the original


ETERNAL DARKNESS

TIME EXTEND

ETERNAL DARKNESS: SANITY'S REQUIEM

FORMAT: **GC**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **SILICON KNIGHTS**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE DATE: **2002**



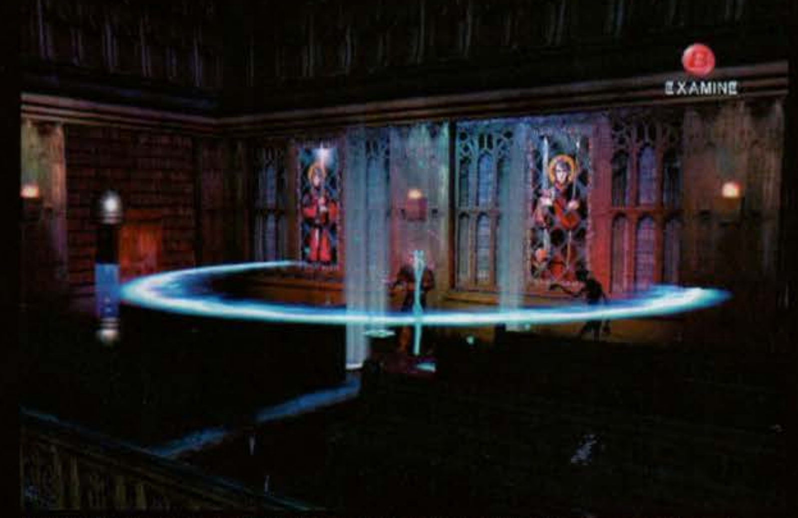
Silicon Knights' Eternal Darkness was supposed to revolutionise survival horror. It didn't, of course. Hindsight shows it did much, much more

Flensed' is the word which best describes *Eternal Darkness*. Not because of what it means – although we'll get to that – but because the decision to use it in the game's dialogue sent players scurrying for their dictionaries as surely as the scares had sent them diving behind their sofas. Games in general – particularly console games and especially particularly Nintendo games – aren't supposed to be erudite.

Eternal Darkness, however, wears its scholarship on its sleeve, from the opening quote from Edgar Allen Poe to the references to Sir James George Frazer's The Golden Bough.

Once players had tracked down 'flensed' in their dictionaries, they found that it was a word whose meaning matched the game perfectly. The fate of the woman who uses it seems much more macabre when you discover that she's had her flesh stripped from her bones like the blubber from a whale. It sums up *Eternal Darkness*' horror very well, full of understated violence and squeamish shlock. But there's another aspect of the word which makes it a good way to sum up the game: it doesn't quite work. Leaving aside the incongruity – why is a sixth century Persian princess using Danish whale-hunting slang? – its obscurity snags the player's attention at a moment when they should be lost in the doomed, bitter romance of Karim and Chandra. 'She was *whatted* by knives?' you say. 'Cleansed? Phlegmed?' At least you did if you'd turned the subtitles off. It's a tiny point, but one which runs right through the game. Silicon Knights had too many ideas for *Eternal Darkness* – some over-elaborate, some clunkily simplistic –

The fate of the woman seems more macabre when you discover she's had her flesh stripped from her bones like the blubber from a whale



Eternal Darkness' magic system was pure theatre, forcing you to stand still while each rune was laboriously etched into the earth. The camera angles – fixed but flexible – added to the sense of deliberate, dramatic staging



The Trapper dimension is an ingenious novelty. Both curse and haven, it offers the player a chance to refill their gauges at the risk of extra attacks. The player can also turn trapper, banishing enemies rather than fighting





and in the process they both created and hobbled a masterpiece.

The tale is certainly elaborate, and too much to be retold here, but its structure is flawless. Two millennia of desperate human struggle against the Darkness are revealed in brief, brutal flashes, dashing you from modern Indonesia to medieval Persia and back again. At first it's frustrating as you body-hop from one bafflingly unrelated character to the other, but soon connecting strands start to reveal themselves, mostly though the familiar architecture of the places you explore. By sending different characters back to the same place at different points in time, Silicon Knights produced a narrative which should form a key chapter in The Big Book Of How Games Ought To Tell Stories. Rather than relying on dialogue or cut-scenes (although the game has plenty of both), it uses your familiarity with the varied locations to provide the context and the tone of each chapter of the story. Discovering the vast cathedral that has grown to absorb Amiens' humble chapel is affecting only because you're painstakingly familiar with the latter. Wandering around the Roivas mansion becomes systematically more fraught as you experience each moment of its bloody history. It's also a kind of story-telling which ties directly onto the gameplay. Knowledge of the environment, and of secrets and items, gained from previous visits allows the puzzles to be more oblique than they would in lesser games.

The characters themselves are also unprecedentedly varied. Most game heroes are pulled together from the most basic of identikits – broad shoulders, big tits, tight pants, bigger guns. *Eternal Darkness* puts you into shoes filled by men who are fat and black and old. You might become frustrated at being forced to waddle around as a middle-aged architect or at a young reporter's suicidal decision to join in World War One armed only with a camera flash, but these limitations mean you never lose the sense of these characters' individuality. These are people with histories and personalities, whose adventures change them, leaving them sometimes wiser, sometimes deader.

The characters you play rot before your eyes, sacrifice themselves to living deaths and descend into spittle-soaked madness

When games put you in control of a character with its own identity, rather than an empty shell that you've created yourself, there's always a tension. 'How can Link be Link if I'm controlling him? How can I be Link if he sometimes does stuff without me telling him to? And why am I calling him 'he' if he's supposed to be me?' *Eternal Darkness* stretches this tension even more. Each chapter takes each character through an identical arc. In the course of going about their lives, each person is drawn to the Darkness. Horrified, they discover that they understood nothing of the real nature of the world. They start out innocent and end up corrupted. It means that, despite the skills and information the player learns throughout the game, each chapter resets the character you play to newbie status. It's here that the game's central conceit, the Tome Of Eternal Darkness, comes into its own. Part elaborate menu system, part get-out-of-jail-free card, the moment each character finds this book is the moment when the player's experience and the character's abilities become fused together. Suddenly, they know everything you know, and the gap is closed between you and your on-screen persona. The Tome Of Eternal Darkness doesn't contain the secrets of a supernatural conspiracy; it contains the secrets of how to design game characters which can withstand the contradiction of being distinct individuals and empty avatars for players to inhabit.

What demonstrates this most keenly is the game's 'real' hero, Alexandra Roivas. This is who you're really supposed to 'be' in the game. The other chapters are experienced as visions she endures while reading the Tome. As a consequence, she follows the rules of videogame hero design.



It's a testament to the game's story telling abilities that the prospect of an ancient evil citadel carved out of your basement seems entirely plausible



SCISSORS, PAPER, BLOOD

Eternal Darkness' devilish theology was also devilishly simple. Each god had a colour, a strength and a weakness. Red beats green, green beats blue, blue beats red. Cleverly, the god you choose in the first chapter becomes your nemesis, not your leader, and those three colours tie the plot and gameplay together, since green also governs sanity, red health and blue magic. Diligent players would also come to control the purple magic of the corpse god Mantorok, with sometimes unpredictable results.





Spells grow in intensity depending on the number of runes cast. The familiar voices which rasp them out become crucial in gauging which you have time for

Miserably bland in comparison to the other characters, it's her clothes that send out the clearest signal. Throughout the game, from the moment she's woken in bed at 3.33 in the morning to the moment, weeks later, when she finally faces the game's ultimate evil, she's dressed in the same nice, safe, hero garb – black vest, black jeans. The fact that she doesn't change is supposed to reassure the player – look, here's the person you're *really* in control of. She's not going to sneak off and do anything without you like, say, have a shower or change her pants. The intention was almost certainly to balance the unsettling character-hopping of the rest of the game, but instead it undermines it. The convincing richness of the monk Luther, madman Maximilian and firefighter Michael demonstrate dramatically that the secret to making a game character easy to identify with isn't simply a case of emptying them out to make room for the player.

These characters, however, aren't the most striking things about the era-skipping structure of the story. What's truly remarkable is how each of them ends. No matter how well you fight or how smartly you puzzle, most of them end in failure. The characters you play rot before your eyes, sacrifice themselves to living deaths, descend into spittle-soaked madness or are simply crushed by the colossal powers they are trying to fight. It flies in the face of one of the most unquestioned assumptions in game design – that players like to win. In *Eternal Darkness* each chapter satisfies even when you can't escape your fate; indeed, each lost character strengthens your motivation to defeat the evil that destroyed them. Players don't like to win, they like the time they spend in the game to take them somewhere, to change the world around them. *Eternal Darkness* shows how much stronger a game's story can be when the player character doesn't have to be a Pollyanna or a John McClane.

These considerations, however, are all the backdrop to *Eternal Darkness'* most famous feature – its insanity effects. As each character is dragged further from their normal lives into the Darkness their sanity erodes, and your screen plays host to a series of tricks and shocks to which no-one was entirely immune. It was here, however, that Silicon Knights' lack of moderation shows itself most clearly. The insanity effects were endlessly



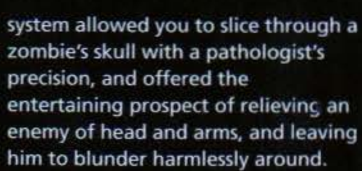
inventive, but far too varied in tone and quality. The cleverest were the ones which reached out into the real world: the 'controller unplugged' error message as zombies swarmed all over you; the 'deleting files' progress bar that popped up when you were trying to save. The simplest were the most effective – notably the awful, desperate banging on the doors as you approached. The cheapest were the ones which undermined this skilfully crafted atmosphere of paranoia and apprehension: the statue that turned to look at you like something out of The Muppets; the slapstick plop of your limbs as they fell off as you walked into a room. Every single effect, whether skilled or clumsy, was spoiled by the Hammer Horror hysteria with which each character would howl (or whimper, or groan) 'This... caaaan't... be... HA-PEN-NING!' after each effect had reset. Had the team had half as many ideas, but twice as much faith in them, *Eternal Darkness* could have been a truly scarring experience.

But these successes and failures are all secondary to the moment in the game which actually borders on the profound. The final visit to the great cathedral at Amiens takes place in 1916, and is seen through the eyes of a young war reporter. From its humble chapel beginnings more than a thousand years ago, you are now met with a vision of hell. Rocked by explosions and permeated with gloom, the cathedral is now a field hospital. The air is sharp with the moans of dying soldiers, the taint of mustard gas almost perceptible. The game, by this stage, has taught you not to believe your eyes. You've been schooled to dismiss visions of cruel and bizarre as this – ranks of young men, broken and burst by bullets and bayonets, barracked in a church. If you didn't know any better, this moment would seem as absurd as any cheap-thrill insanity effect the game had tried so far. Yet not only is it real in the context of the game, it's real for anyone watching. Forget the clever trick of the pretend volume bar appearing on screen, this is the game reaching out and grabbing a piece of human history. It's a moment whose meaning is as grim as it is irrefutable: forget Chattur'gha, Xel'lotath and Ulyaoth. There's no need to weave a fantastical tale about humanity coming close to destruction, about it being eaten alive from within by

The game's puzzles veer from the simple to the exhausting. Collecting parchments and letters is a common task, and one which often takes you from one end of the level to the other. Skills learned in each chapter are used by Alex to unlock the next

As each character completes their appointed role, they become immortalised in the strange room which houses the Tome. It's a grim, sobering sight





giant jellyfish. You need to look no further than the man in the next bed to see how close humanity is to evil, how close it came to destroying itself.

And while you can't get much bigger than that, *Eternal Darkness* also excels at the small. This is a game that loves the details. A key feature of the combat is the finishing move – the moment when you plunge your weapon over and over into the mass of zombie flesh you've felled in combat. Somehow, this gruesome ceremony helps you recover some of your sanity, and each character does it with individual flair. From a callous shotgun blast to the head to a fat, clumsy boot to the belly, each character has a flourish that sums them up perfectly. Then there's the continuity. As you revisit each area, you'll find traces of your earlier adventures there. Prising a familiar sword out of the desiccated hand of a character you played as, and died as, centuries before is immensely satisfying. Recognising the corpse you unthinkingly transported to the mysterious Trapper dimension when you yourself are teleported there substantially bolsters the sense that this is a single, coherent universe where the things you do last and have consequences.

The Trapper dimension is a perfect example of the game's unique approach to magic. Spells had a simple grammar – combine a verb (protect, absorb, etc) and a noun (self, area, item, etc), and you were free to invent a core vocabulary of vital magicks. These had to be cast live, each rune fizzing and sparking on the ground around you, and any attack would disrupt the spell and leave you defenceless. Many players found it unforgivably annoying, since it turned battles into a tedious game of bowls, rushing from one end of the arena to the other to gain enough time to complete a casting. There's no question, however, that it imposed a rhythm and a drama onto the game, particularly in the later stages where you and your opponent would face off against each other, holding your nerve while the air shimmered and voices hissed and scraped: "PARGON PARGON BANKOROK CHATTUR'GHA PARGON SANTAK PARGON".

If ever a game needed good magic, this was it, the clunky combat (not perhaps inappropriate for a set-up which had amateurs fighting zombies) disappointed many. It forced a lumpy, methodical pace onto many sections of the game that ill-suited its story and atmosphere. It had its satisfactions, however. The targeting system allowed you to slice through a zombie's skull with a pathologist's precision, and offered the entertaining prospect of relieving an enemy of head and arms, and leaving him to blunder harmlessly around.



The game's colour coding extends to the enemies you fight. Physically different, the zombies use magic, trigger insanity or regrow their limbs according to the god they serve. It acts as secret – if very subtle – difficulty select

There's no need to weave a fantastical tale about humanity coming close to destruction, about it being eaten alive by giant jellyfish

Nor was combat the only disappointment. Most of the puzzles contained in the Roivas mansion were old-fashioned, either insulting or confounding the player's intelligence. Finding buckshee pump-handles and letters hidden in spice jars seemed downright childish when compared to the sophisticated elements of the game. Other crude mechanics just seemed entirely pointless – requiring you to press the architect's 'survey' button at key points in the level felt like a hangover from a 16bit past. And for all the atmospherics, the game's N64 heritage is even clearer today than when it was released. Although many of the environments still convey a real sense of solidity and history, the textures, and particularly the wooden animation, serve as a reminder of how things used to be.

A masterpiece, then? Who cares. There are games that come much closer to perfection, without doubt. And certainly, those which have proved more influential. And many, of course, which have sold more copies. But few have as much to teach us as *Eternal Darkness*. As games become increasingly preoccupied with character and story, it's shocking that the benchmark for games' ability to emotionally affect players is still assumed to be the death of Aeris. That *Eternal Darkness* isn't first on people's lips when they open that can of worms is perhaps the greatest insanity effect of all.



The cathedral at Amiens, alongside the Roivas mansion, acts as the game's main focus. Its evolution is as historically accurate as it is visually impressive



Through her reading of the Tome Of Eternal Darkness, Alexandra inherits all the skills of those who have gone before. This leaves her ready for the final fight





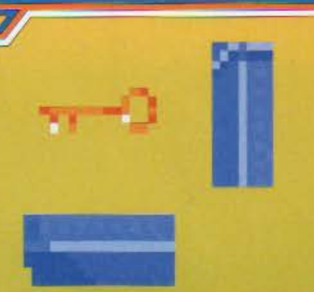
THE MAKING OF… GAUNTLET

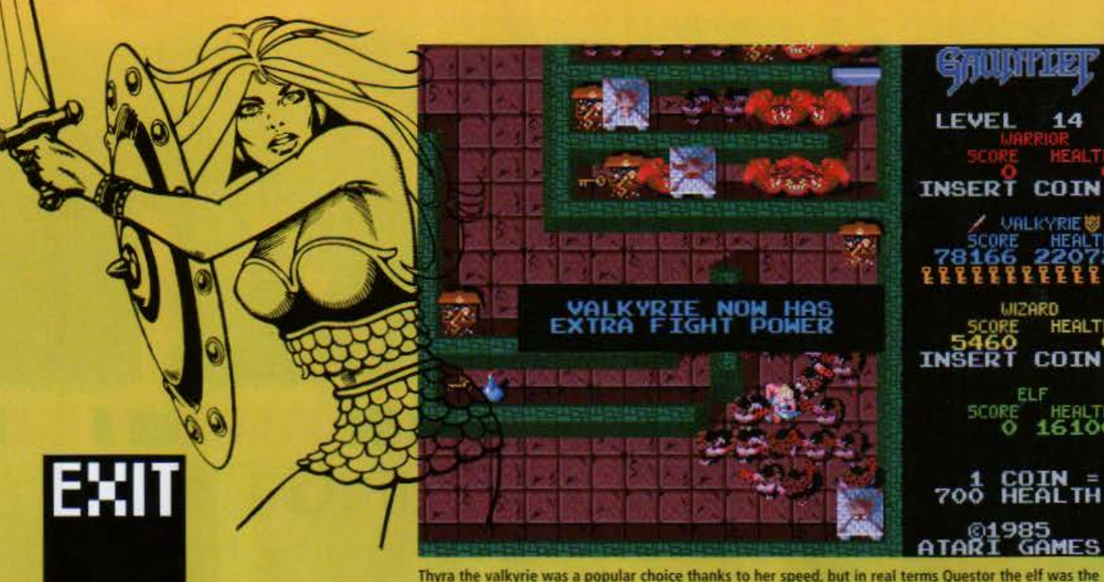
Before Lara had even developed habits of a raiding nature, Atari created an exploration game that revolutionised the action adventure. This month, we unearth a genuine gaming treasure

ORIGINAL FORMAT: COIN-OP PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE ORIGIN: US ORIGINAL RELEASE: 1985

By the mid-'80s, **Ed Logg**, creator of *Asteroids* and *Centipede*, had already established himself as a game developing legend in an industry that was just a little over a decade old. While his first two hits were probably his biggest financial successes and most well known, Logg's 1985 introduction of *Gauntlet* pioneered a series of lasting gaming and design elements still reflected in today's games. For developers, *Gauntlet* ushered in a series of core building blocks like multiplayer co-operative/competitive-style gaming, class-based characters, a nonlinear playing field and a pay-per-play system where coins bought a player health.

Just a few years past the 1980 introduction of *Asteroids*, the coin-operated market was no longer dominant. Coin-op developers were facing new competition from the attention-grabbing home console market. Even within Atari, there was an internal struggle which caused the company to split in two directions: Atari Games Corp became the





Thyra the valkyrie was a popular choice thanks to her speed, but in real terms Questor the elf was the most durable character, with magic powers rivalling the wizard's – an essential factor later in the game



The exact nature of the design involved in most levels couldn't be appreciated when you could see only a portion at a time…

coin-op division, and Atari Corp took the rest of the business – home console and computer games.

To stay in play, coin-op developers needed to outdo the home console games. "No longer could we get by with just a simple game. You could find these on all the home consoles and we wanted and needed to do something that would make the players come to the arcades. Games became more complex," says Logg. In addition, coin-op developers became slaves to feature creep: "When one game adds, say, a high score feature, all games thereafter have to do the same thing."

It's no surprise that *Gauntlet*, originally titled *Dungeons*, was inspired by Dungeons & Dragons. "My son was big into Dungeons & Dragons at the time and he was begging me to make a Dungeons & Dragons game. I had no idea how to do this until a co-worker, Robin Zeigler, brought in a new Atari game, called *Dandy*. Not only was it fun and innovative, but it gave me that spark to create a game with all the Dungeons & Dragons features I wanted into a multiplayer game." Jack Palevich, *Dandy*'s creator, tried fruitlessly to get his name included in the credits for *Gauntlet*. In lieu of public recognition, Atari Games Corp gave Palevich a *Gauntlet* cabinet.

Logg's original game development documents describe *Gauntlet* as a classic Dungeons & Dragons adventure: "Players must navigate the maze, kill the nasties, eat food, collect treasures, open doors and find their way deeper into the dungeon until they reach the Hall Of Death. This is the final resting place of lost goodies. They will grab as much treasure as they want and try to escape back to daylight thus ending the game." When finally released, *Gauntlet* had no end, no Hall of Death and no escape to daylight.

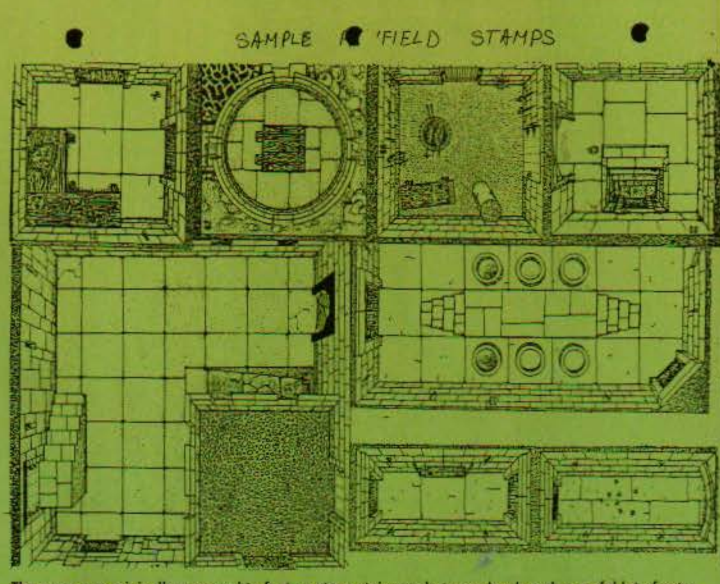
With its revolutionary non-linear design, *Gauntlet* gave players multiple choices. They were no longer forced into playing the game over a predetermined route. Like Dungeons & Dragons, *Gauntlet* players could choose their own path, searching for keys, treasures, food and transporters to get to other levels. Unlike many games, you didn't always have to fight off the bad guys – sometimes you could find another route and escape.

With the switchover from the 6502 to the more capable 68000 microprocessor, the development environment at Atari had changed considerably. "We were actually entering our own code at this point. Our development tools changed, too. We were now programming in C instead of assembly language," says Logg. "We no longer entered our



The original cabinet's scale had something to do with *Gauntlet*'s success: with enough room for four people to take part comfortably, it took multiplayer gaming to new levels in the arcade





The game was originally supposed to feature stone stairways between levels and an awful lot of extra detail included for atmospheric purposes. The contrast between this and the final game is quite stark


A fairly thick volume, the *Gauntlet* Operators Manual is essential reading for the collector

programs into the development environment by paper tape." And the list goes on. All the advances had made development considerably easier, and the processor could handle many more instructions, but the games were definitely more complex.

Gauntlet's unique solutions for gameplay garnered Atari Games Corp five patents. One of the patents dealt with a streamlined method to determine collisions for the numerous objects on the screen – a common hurdle for early game developers. "Normal collision code tests 1,000 objects with the other 1,000 objects resulting in 1,000,000 collision checks," says Logg. Programmers could reduce this number but that often introduced a processing overhead. Logg's new method reduced both the overhead and collision tests to the lowest number possible. Commonly, nine collision tests were required for every object. Depending on the object's direction and its position, Logg could drop that collision testing to just three.



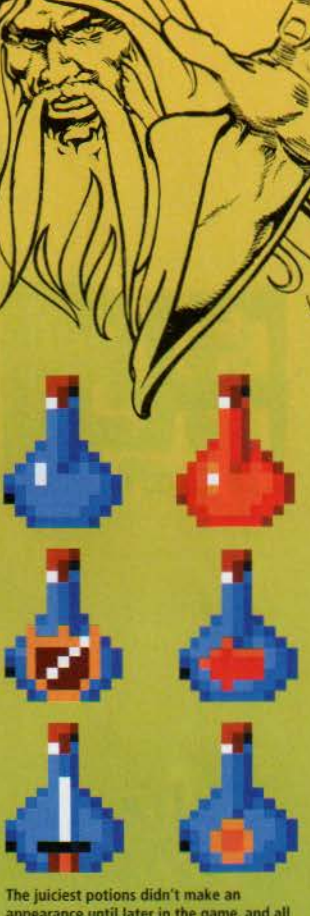
Thanks to superior hide, Thor the warrior was able to wade into danger and hand-to-hand it with enemies. Facing up to multiple Deaths, however, was enough to panic even the sternest gamer

"MANY OPERATORS THOUGHT IT WAS UNSAFE, DESPITE OUR DEMONSTRATIONS DROPPING STEEL BALLS ONTO MONITORS"

The cabinet was also quite unusual. It was large and players viewed the screen from different angles instead of just straight on: "I decided I did not want to have a Plexiglas shield in front of the monitor. I did this to reduce glare, which became unsolvable from four different viewpoints. [In those days having] no Plexiglas was unheard of, and many operators thought it was unsafe, despite our demonstrations dropping steel balls onto monitors," Logg says.

Although Logg is credited as the game's developer, he tips his hat to engineer Pat McCarthy for designing the hardware and to co-programmer Bob Flanagan for covering the development process while Logg went on sabbatical.

Prior to 1985, videogames were generally isolated to singleplayer


The juiciest potions didn't make an appearance until later in the game, and all were worth fighting for among the group



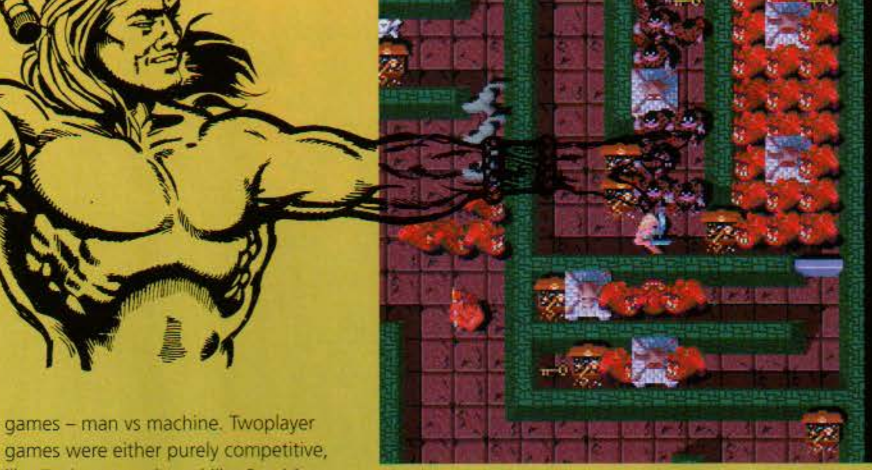
Atari used its own in-house graphics tools for sprite generation, but designs on paper were also used by Logg and his team of artists


Roast chicken with vegetables, golden amulets, chests of treasure and grog: what every good adventurer is seeking



Though small, *Gauntlet*'s sprites were capable of stirring emotion – especially when you'd just been robbed blind

games – man vs machine. Twoplayer games were either purely competitive, like *Tank*, or turn-based like *Pac-Man*. *Gauntlet* introduced a simultaneous Man + man + man + man vs machine type of gameplay, and there were many advantages to this new concurrent multiplayer game. *Gauntlet* was more social, as gamers had to co-operate and talk to each other in order to clear a level of the dungeon. But that co-operation often strayed as players turned against each other competing for food, keys and treasure.

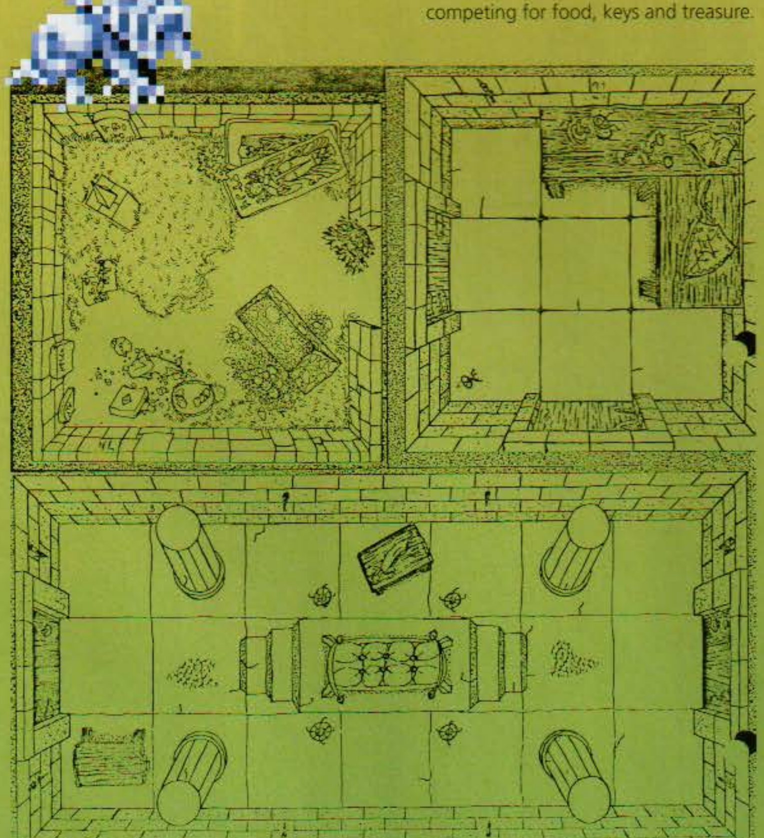


Though it was inspired by the likes of Dungeons & Dragons, *Gauntlet* introduced videogame mechanics – notably monster generators, which spewed out baddies until destroyed – to maintain an urgent pace

Enhancing this need for co-operation was *Gauntlet*'s introduction of class-based characters. When you walked up to the game, you got to choose a protagonist – Warrior, Elf, Valkyrie or Wizard, and each had different strengths and weaknesses. A deficiency in one character could be supplanted by an asset of another. For example, while the Warrior is slow and strong, the Elf is weak but fast. Although the variables were simplistic, the teamwork spawned from *Gauntlet*'s class-based system can be seen in all sorts of multiplayer sports, adventure, and firstperson shooter games today.

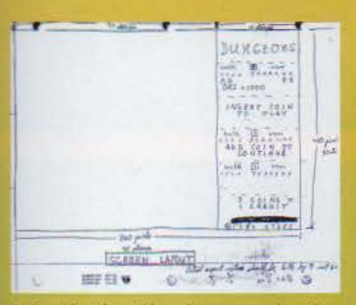
Synthesized voice had been sporadically used in games in the early '80s. It was introduced as a novelty, but with *Gauntlet* the voice became a constant presence, acting as a constant guide or dungeon master. Most notably, players laughed at the poor sap who was told by the machine that he "needs food badly". The dungeon master provided humour and a launching point for animosity among players. Logg and team were aware of what they were doing: "We just used the voice to give this impression and provide comic relief as well as pointing out helpful or not so helpful things like, 'the wizard has eaten all the food lately'" – which of course was a sure indication the other players would turn on the wizard.

Field tests for new coin-op games are a well-guarded secret. They're a


These crypts with their stone doorways never made it into the final game. What's interesting about this art is the *Atic Atac*-like perspective, which was clearly changed once the game went into production



Bonus rounds involving all the treasure you could carry (or at least reach before the timer ran out) provided light relief between killing ghosts and lobbers. But you didn't know where you'd be next


As is evident from this early screen mockup, the game had the working title of simply *Dungeons*



Naturally, operators were able to tickle the cabinets dipswitches in order to make your money worth less health. Whatever the settings, though, Atari's game was a major earner for the coin-op giant

chance for developers to test players' interest and decide how much revenue the game could pull in.

However, before Atari Games Corp could find out, someone blew *Gauntlet*'s cover. Word leaked out that there was a new four-person multiplayer game in a small arcade in San Jose, California. Reports came in that Sega and other game manufacturers had shown up at the arcade and begun taking pictures. Fearing that the competition had their eyes on stealing the game, Logg quickly instructed the management to pull the game. It was a necessary defensive move that, unfortunately, didn't allow Logg's team to witness even a full week of testing. That wasn't a problem, as the little testing Logg did see proved that *Gauntlet* was about to change the way people played games: "There was a sign above the game that said play was limited to a certain number of tokens while others were waiting. I saw players dump large numbers of tokens into the game at one time. I had never seen this before. I must say it really made my day," recalls Logg.

Logg has met and witnessed great *Asteroids* and *Centipede* players, but never any great *Gauntlet* players. That's because to become a great *Gauntlet* player you had to play by yourself. *Gauntlet* was rarely a singleplayer game, and other players became an unknown variable you couldn't control. "After releasing *Gauntlet* in Japan, we heard rumours of players who could play forever," remembers Logg. Not believing it, Logg's team received a video showing it actually being done. "So we had to add code that would start removing food from the level if we detected players playing this well."

"TO BECOME A GREAT GAUNTLET PLAYER YOU HAD TO PLAY BY YOURSELF. OTHER PLAYERS BECAME AN UNKNOWN VARIABLE"

The reason solo players flourished in Japan rather than elsewhere is because new players there would often ask permission to join. Unfortunately for them, the answer was often 'no'. In the US arcades, players wouldn't bother asking and would just drop their quarters into the machine. Japanese gaming culture prevented others from joining in, thus negating *Gauntlet*'s multiplayer playability and its revenue potential.

To arcade owners, *Gauntlet*'s most amazing achievement was its ability to quickly generate revenue. One arcade operator in Toronto, Canada, would always thank Logg for giving him *Gauntlet* because it earned him the most money of any game he had ever had. He raked in a whopping $2,000 in a week, and that was enough to pay for the game in less than two weeks.

Even though the concept of multiplayer gaming had yet been tested, Logg knew gamers were eager to play co-operatively: "At one time, marketing clearly asked: 'How do we get total strangers to play together?' I guess the answer is to build a great game. I'm glad I had a chance to prove them wrong."


Only some of your foes were capable of flinging projectiles. Death himself didn't need to bother with such things, of course



The finished characters' names and appearances varied considerably from the original sketches. And just what did happen to the dwarven warrior?



Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Climax

DATE FOUNDED: 1988

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 400

HEAD OF STUDIO: Karl Jeffery (below)





Sudeki set out to meld the best aspects of eastern and western RPG traditions, setting them in a lavish fantasy environment

URL: www.climaxgroup.com

KEY STAFF:
Simon Gardner, president, Climax Action; Tony Beckwith, president, Climax Racing; David Nicholson, president, Climax Online; David Schwartz, president, Climax LA; Nigel Fox, CFO, Climax

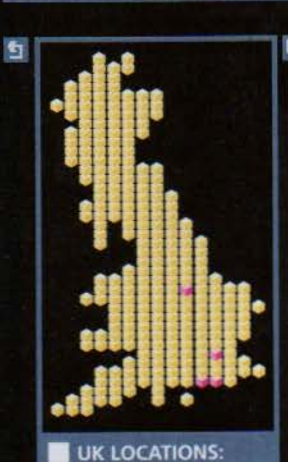
SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:
Sudeki (Xbox), *ATV Offroad Fury 3* (PS2), *Tron 2.0 Killer App* (Xbox), *Serious Sam: Next Encounter* (GBA, GC, PS2), *MotoGP: Ultimate Racing Technology 1* and *2* (Xbox), *Lilo & Stitch 2: Hamsterviel's Havoc* (GBA)

KEY AREAS OF EXPERTISE:
Executive team with wealth of development knowledge and expertise.
Global base (studios in Europe and US).
Proprietary technology.
Extensive and award-winning online experience on PC and console.
Games turned around on time and on budget.
Strong business model, allowing for investment in own IP, as well as core tech.
The ability to work on any genre, such as action, driving, online or kids.
Talented development teams able to prototype imaginative games rather than simply producing design docs.



Climax is well known for its affinity for two-wheeled racing games, but *ATV Offroad Fury 3*'s quad bikes let you loose on four. The developer will be bringing the franchise to PSP sometime in the next year

CLIMAX



UK LOCATIONS:
Portsmouth
Nottingham
Kingston
Brighton

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Avalon (next-gen), *Black Hawk Down* (Xbox), *Warhammer Online* (PC), *Sudeki* (PC), *MotoGP 3* (Xbox, PC), *Crash'n'Burn* and numerous other unannounced projects across all platforms, including next-gen consoles.

PROPRIETARY TECHNOLOGY:

Climax has an extensive suite of proprietary tools and technology. We have a Core Technology Group which is responsible for delivering all technology to the entire company and supporting them. We have Leviathan – our MMO engine and toolset – which has been behind *Warhammer Online* and is also being used for other exciting MMOs.

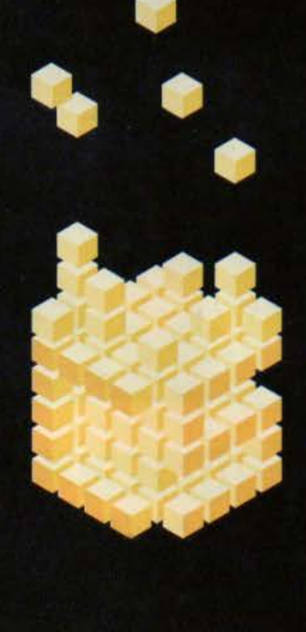
Also, the efficient and finely tuned Onslaught engine is a revelation in PS2 game development. Its ability to display over 1,200 high-polygon characters at a maximum framerate without placing a serious strain on CPU time – combined with a highly efficient landscape rendering system that can display 32 million textured and lit triangles per second – allows for the development of even more exciting and epic games than ever before.

We have also recently completed development of our City Editor tools. These are set to enable production in a matter of weeks rather than months. Whether you're after a quaint little village or sprawling metropolis, Climax is able to instantly stitch together a map in realtime. Placing roads, street furniture and buildings in a free-roaming environment can be done in the click of a mouse. Once complete this can be effortlessly populated with pedestrians and traffic using the AI path editing tools.

We have a well established set of tools and pipelines at Climax, and the next evolution of these tools is a product named Tomcat. Tomcat and its associated renderer technology is truly next-gen. Built from a stable platform that has been proven in several games, we only need to innovate for the next generation features, some of which include realtime shader combing and preview, normal mapping, a bloom and ViViD renderer, online and networking tools, DYNE physics and a realtime game tweaker. Normal maps are core to our next-generation strategy. They provide an incredible amount of detail for little cost, so you get a considerable and disproportionate gain in quality. By having the most efficient pipeline in the business, we will have the highest levels of detail and realism in our next-gen games. It's these kind of advances which produce worlds you can really believe in.

These are just the latest advances from Climax's Core Technology Group – we also have Blimey 3.0, DYNE, etc. We support all platforms: PS2, Xbox, GameCube, PC, GBA, PSP, Nintendo DS, mobile and the upcoming next-generation consoles.

Codeshop
Tracking developments in development



All in hand

With three powerful handheld devices launched in late 2004, tools companies and game developers alike are having to up the ante



Phil Harrison, executive vice president of development, SCEE
www.scee.com

www.gizmondo.com
www.fathammer.com
www.snsys.com
www.metrowerks.com



One of the main concerns of developers has been to get access to development tools for the new handheld devices. Final releases of thirdparties tools such as those offered by SN Systems and Metrowerks, as well as official devkits, only started shipping in late summer



Marking the start of the rolling global launches for Tiger Telematic's Gizmondo, Sony's PSP and Nintendo's DS, the winter of 2004 sees a new era for handheld gaming devices. Previously characterised by the child-like feel of the Game Boys, the market has upgraded with a new grown-up feel; something demonstrated, not least, in the ergonomic design of the units. But perhaps more significant for developers is the jump from 2D graphics to hardware-accelerated 3D. Indeed, the step in graphical power is remarkable: the equivalent jump for consoles being a transition from Nintendo's early-'90s SNES directly to 1999's PlayStation2.

"PSP's polygonal throughput is slightly, but only slightly, lower than PS2 and the pixel fill rate is about the same. However, the pixel operations of the PSP are a bit more advanced than PS2, so the end results can be better," says **Phil Harrison**, Sony Computer Entertainment Europe's executive vice president of development. "So, although marginally less is being rendered onto the screen, the overall experience is probably better than PS2, especially when you factor in using headphones and the controlled listening environment that results."

Great news for gamers, of course, but it does create something of a quandary for handheld developers who, typically, have worked in much smaller teams and to much shorter schedules than their console-based colleagues. Now they are having to bulk-up and learn new tools and skills to fulfil the potential. So it's apt timing that crucial development tools, both from device manufacturers such as Sony and Nintendo and from thirdparty vendors like Bristol-based SN Systems and Texan outfit Metrowerks are now, finally, becoming available.

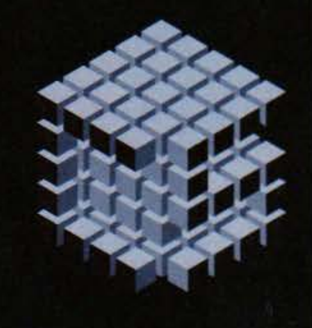
"Sega is pleased especially that important functions such as .NET integration, fast compile speed and good debugger GUI have featured from early versions of SN System's ProDG for PSP," says **Yuji Naka**, Sega's R&D creative officer. "It offers us rich functionality and is stable while keeping up with fast changes in game development."

Metrowerks' CodeWarrior integrated development environment (IDE) offers similar features; with the company releasing a version for PSP development as well as providing the IDE that ships with Nintendo's official DS tools, and handles its novel hardware features such as touch-screen input and voice recognition.

The availability of such tools is particularly key for PSP developers who had to use PC-based emulators for much of their initial work. Harrison reckons this provided a good starting point however: "I think it allowed teams to start on 'real' programming prior to the development kits arriving," he explains. "Many of our early PSP projects also benefited from some kind of OpenGL PC or PS2 implementation as a test-bed for animation, graphics and game design, for example. Once PSP development hardware arrived, the emulator code compiled remarkably quickly onto the PSP with only a few minor gotchas in the compilers to overcome."

Yet despite the similarities between the basic processors in PS2 and PSP, **Martin Day**, a co-director of SN Systems says there are significant differences: "The base instruction sets are the same but there are different custom extensions on each processor. In particular, the PSP's VFPU (floating point vector unit) is very different to the PS2's vector unit co-processor," he says. "As a result, our compiler and assembler need to work with different sets of instructions with different timings. Also, the debugger has to support a completely different kernel."

One result is that most, if not all, PSP development is new, with little code being taken from existing PlayStation2 games. "All SCEE firstparty games are ground up PSP developments," Harrison confirms. "Some internal routines, such as artificial intelligence or game logic, can be ported over as C or C++, but for the



most part it's all new." One studio which has successfully made the jump from GBA-style development to PSP is US studio Backbone Entertainment, which was created by the merger of three non-traditional game companies: Digital Eclipse, ImaginEngine and Games2Learn. For example, its *Death Jr* title was the first game shown running on PSP hardware at the 2004 Game Developers Conference in San Jose.

Senior producer **Chris Carla** says the company has adjusted well to the change: "Both PSP and DS are pretty straightforward to develop for, there's no Saturn or PS2-style weirdness," he says. "The PSP is basically like working on any 3D console. It's probably closest to GameCube in terms of how you deal with the machine and performance. DS has more limited 3D capabilities, but obviously the dual screens and touchscreen offer a lot in terms of gameplay." Aside from the main Sony and Nintendo products is the dark horse that is Tiger Telematics' Gizmondo. Using a similar ARM CPU to one of the two found in Nintendo's DS, the Gizmondo was originally designed without 3D acceleration. Comparisons, particularly to PSP, meant that a last minute decision was made to add a custom 3D chip – Nvidia's GoForce 3D 4500. Designed for high-end PDAs and smartphones, the GoForce 4500 supports high resolution graphics including 40bit colour, programmable shaders and bilinear and trilinear texture filtering.

Crucially, it also comes with Nvidia's much hyped nPower technology for preserving battery life. This is important as the extra transistors required for 3D acceleration require extra power. But thanks to nPower and additional engineering support from Nvidia, sources claim Gizmondo's overall battery life has been improved by GoForce 3D 4500's introduction. Speculation continues to run hot concerning PSP's battery life, however. The issue is that in addition to its large processors, PSP uses a CD-style media – Sony's proprietary UMD format – which consumes power when data is being streamed from the disk to the system. For this reason, PSP developers will have to pay particular attention to the way they structure their games' loading operations.

As Harrison points out: "Battery life is a function of many things like sub-CPU useage, memory access and disk spin up and down and, as part of that, game design can have a big influence, too."

While assimilating skills from the console world, it seems that developers will have to continue to pay attention to the nuances of handheld devices to get the most out of these new opportunities.

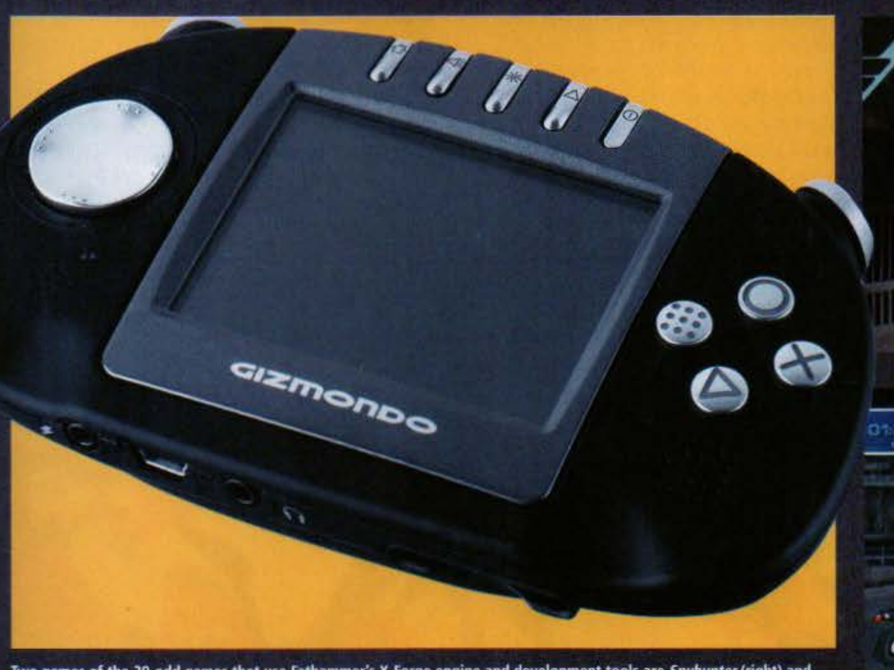


Bridging the gap

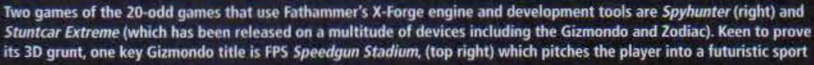
While many of the tools providers for PSP and DS support console development, the market also creates a gap for new entrants. One such is Finnish company Fathammer. Its X-Forge 3D engine, tool chains and development environment was designed for high-end mobile phones and PDAs, but has been upgraded for more complex hardware.

"The most striking feature of mobile platforms is the enormous variation which affects even the most basic features of the devices, such as controls and screen resolutions," muses the company's chief technology office and co-founder **Arto Astala**. "What we've done is put an enormous amount of effort to empower developers in overcoming this variability and to decouple the different aspects, so they can tackle each issue separately."

Already well established in the phone market, the company's first gain up was Tapwave's Zodiac handheld. It has since become a core tool for N-Gage and Gizmondo developers as well, with over 20 commercially-available games using the technology. The company is also looking at extending support for DS and PSP. One example of a game that has scaled well across all devices is the 3D racing game *Stuntcar Extreme*, which runs on a range of devices from UIQ phones and Nokia Series 60 devices to Zodiac and now Gizmondo.






Two games of the 20-odd games that use Fathammer's X-Forge engine and development tools are *Spyhunter* (right) and *Stuntcar Extreme* (which has been released on a multitude of devices including the Gizmondo and Zodiac). Keen to prove its 3D grunt, one key Gizmondo title is FPS *Speedgun Stadium*, (top right) which pitches the player into a futuristic sport

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Ceremonies

BY GARY PENN

I like order – if only to give me the satisfaction of ignoring or undermining it. Like most people, if I don't have pots to piss in, I use the floor. There aren't many pots in game design – let alone pots that actually prove useful in the process of development. That's why we end up wading waist-deep in sloppy shit like 'gameplay': stupid, lazy shorthand for anyone trying to sound informed or clever or artistic (like me, especially in the '80s).

"It's all about gameplay." Really? That's helpful. Is that how the game plays? How well the game plays? How the game can be played (cf: tactile, tactical and strategic 'gameplay')? The rules of the game? How the game is controlled? How well its tactile, visual and audible qualities are attuned? The essence of the game in play? The very stuff of play? All of these things?

All those components to consider, design, build, assemble, test, refine...

Infoplease.com's summary of ceremony: "[An] expression of shared feelings and attitudes through more or less formally ordered actions of an essentially symbolic nature performed on appropriate occasions. Ceremonies express, perpetuate and transmit elements of the value and sentiment system and aim at preserving such values and sentiments from doubt and opposition; moreover, they intensify the solidarity of the participants."

Ceremonies are deeply intertwined in everything from smoking to sex. Ceremonies reinforce, remind, welcome, warn, set the scene, stimulate the senses and get players 'in the mood' (think foreplay). Ceremonies are incentives to play and sustain player interest.

> "Ceremonies are deeply intertwined in everything from smoking to sex. Ceremonies reinforce, remind, welcome, stimulate the senses"

More? All of these things and more mean 'gameplay', so I'm told. It means so many different things to different people that it's worthless. It's a mirage and utterly unnecessary.

A word I find far more useful – especially in recent years – is 'ceremony'. It started with a need to classify the components of an entertainment product. There's more to making games than building and exploiting toysets and rules – so many other components that aren't necessarily clearly defined or are typically lumped together under the delightful notion of 'front-end'. What this – and more besides – amounts to are rituals marked by ceremonies.

Even the smallest of games on the simplest of platforms can easily feature dozens of ceremonies and the numbers run into hundreds – thousands – as the scale and platforms grow.

Ceremonies frame and punctuate play, principally the start and end of play.

Ceremonies confirm the occurrence of events – principally those out of the ordinary, such as consecutive, concurrent or repetitive moments. Ceremonies provide affirmation of player existence, appraisal of player performance and reinforcement of player value.

Ceremonies take the form of simple but pronounced effects or extravagant spectacle. Typically terms such as 'FMV' and 'cut-scene' are used to describe more cinematic ceremonies, but these presuppose a form. Minor ceremonies recognise the selection of options. Mario changes to or from Super Mario. An activated console announces itself through ceremony.

Take a television game show and the attention lavished on the contestants within a clear framework. That distinctive Tarrant ritual in Who Wants To Be A Millionaire? that draws out the moment, builds the tension, before revealing that the contestant has given the right or wrong answer. The handing over of the cheque before snatching it away...

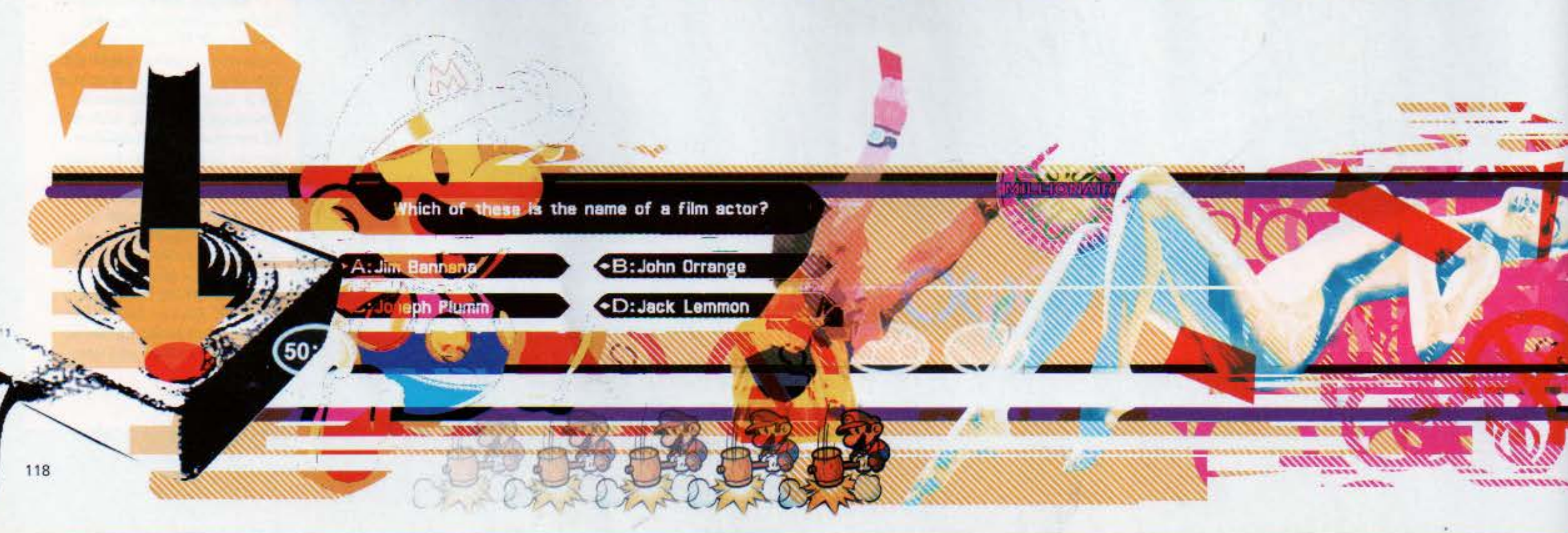
Ceremonies regularly and effectively punctuate cartoons – especially anime (no doubt a reflection of Japan's visible, respectful ceremonial culture). Films feature ceremonial establishing shots and distinctive forewarnings. We just aren't prepared without the right rite.

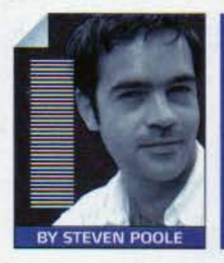
Sports make extensive use of ceremonies, with visible referees usually accompanied by crowds, cheerleaders, music and players. There are opening and closing ceremonies, awards ceremonies, preview and review ceremonies (usually via commentators). There are ceremonies for players entering or leaving play, prior to play starting or during play as the result of injury, broken rules, scoring or substitutions.

Thinking about ceremonies encourages paying attention to players. We adore spectacle. We crave it. Ceremony is everything – particularly when we are at its heart. I am the player. I am the centre of the universe. Play revolves around me. This is all for my benefit.

The use of ceremonies makes all the difference. The latest *Burnout* would be a far less satisfying experience if it weren't for its well-crafted ceremonies (especially its commendable use of camera cuts – a technique our industry seems to fear as much as early cinema did). Ceremony is a key aspect of information design – a critical area of design seldom formally considered in the development of virtual toys and games. The use of ceremony represents a huge area of consideration – a sizeable slice of information design providing focus for a powerful component of entertainment.

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki





BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY

Mad world

It's a strange world I live in. Morality has been mathematised. Utterly incommensurate actions are all given points on the same two-dimensional scale of good or bad. If I physically abuse a child who is bullying another, that is a good deed. (Violence is the only language they understand, you see.) However, if I physically abuse a child who wants to commit vandalism and theft, that is for some reason a bad deed.

The moral arithmetic of whether I am, overall, a good or bad person becomes absurd. I can expiate the gratuitous killing of an innocent civilian by killing a few wasps in the forest. Neglecting my wife so that she divorces me is more evil than actually beating her to death with my fists. If I am harassed by the authorities for having committed theft or murder, I can simply pay a fine. On the other hand, this weird free-for-all is married to certain extremely conservative social conventions. Sex before marriage is not merely frowned upon, it is actually impossible.

This world is, of course, Albion, the setting of *Fable*. Now, *Fable* is not a bad game. In many ways it's very interesting: it's one of those hugely ambitious yet deeply flawed videogames that we might cherish more than games that execute brilliantly a conventional concept. (Although I am still reminded every time a game such as *Fable* comes along of the unparalleled genius of *Ocarina Of Time*.) But the moral system of *Fable* is deeply broken. Sure, you can laugh it off and have fun anyway, but if you think morality in videogames is an interesting area of exploration it's worth looking at why it doesn't work here. I think that the very bizarreness and inconsistency of *Fable*'s morality system teaches us an important lesson, with wide ramifications in videogame design. The lesson is this: the application of a computational approach to human experience can easily lead to absurd consequences, so great care is needed.

> The application of a computational approach to human experience can easily lead to absurd consequences, so great care is needed

We've actually been through this before, in the history of philosophy. Utilitarianism, as proposed by John Stuart Mill and others in the 19th century, was an attempt to apply reasoned mathematical calculus to ethical problems. To simplify somewhat, actions were considered morally worthy if they minimised the overall suffering or maximised the overall pleasure of a group of people (or, later, animals). Early critics delighted in pointing out the absurd consequences of such calculations by inventing clever thought experiments, and the utilitarians responded by refining and finessing their calculus, adding more axes and variables, in order to take account of such situations and still accord with moral 'common sense'.

One thing that was very clear to the utilitarians right from the start, however, was that suffering weighed more heavily on one side of the equation than pleasure did on the other. It would not be permissible to torture one person to death to satisfy the voyeuristic, sadistic pleasure of a thousand others. On the other hand, it might well be compulsory to sacrifice one person to save the lives of a thousand, ten or even two others, if we could be totally certain that those consequences would follow (the fact that, in practical circumstances, we almost never could was a continuing flaw in Utilitarianism).

This, being only a very brief and crude sketch of the beginnings of Utilitarianism, is already vastly more sophisticated, and accords better with our ordinary moral intuition, than the moral calculus going on in *Fable*. But the fact that videogames are computational systems means that two centuries of argument about Utilitarianism can be considered directly relevant to any videogame that tries to treat of human ethics.

Now, I don't know if Peter Molyneux and his colleagues sat down and read everyone from J S Mill to Peter Singer while working on *Fable*. Maybe they did. If so, however, there's no sign of it. And if they didn't, why not? Many very clever people have already thought very deeply about similar problems. Why not exploit their intelligence? If you subscribe to a kind of reverse snobbery which says that philosophy has nothing to do with videogames (on account of the latter, perhaps, just being 'fun'), you doom yourself to playing games that will find it much harder to incorporate any kind of sophistication in the treatment of morality – and that sort of sophistication could actually make a game more fun. Molyneux himself seems to believe so, and I agree.

In general, one of the ways in which videogames are currently immature is that they seem to exist in a hermetic bubble, not referring to or drawing from the history of endeavour in other disciplines. There are exceptions, of course. Kojima mines film (although quite narrowly restricted to the Hollywood action genre); and there's often a lot of art-historical research and imagination worked by designers even into mediocre games. But why not use less obvious sources? Why not use philosophy, if it's directly relevant? Why not engage in the larger cultural conversation?

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames (Fourth Estate). www.stevenpoole.net



THE GUEST COLUMN

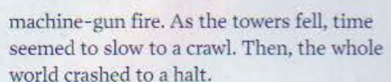
A different kind of grief

BY TIM GUEST

In August last year, architect Derek Jones built two full-scale 110-storey skyscrapers entirely out of wooden blocks. When the mammoth task was complete, he realised his constructions were an almost exact replica of the World Trade Centre's twin towers. So, along with a journalist, he invited a friend who had lost a relative in the attacks of September 11 2001 to sit inside the towers with him. Then, with the three of them still inside, he knocked the towers down.

The journalist, **Wagner James Au**, panicked when he lost sight of the horizon. "You want to run to a window and leap out, if only to get clear of the turmoil," he reported. "But in an instant, there simply is no window to jump from. Or even a floor on which to run." The sound of clattering wood surrounded them like machine-gun fire. As the towers fell, time seemed to slow to a crawl. Then, the whole world crashed to a halt.

> Throughout millennia, mankind has dreamed alone. Now in our virtual worlds we are able to share and inhabit each other's dreams



Literally. Because all of this was nearly, but not quite, happening. Jones was in his apartment in Chicago. James Au was in his office in San Francisco. The buildings themselves were in the Olive district of an entirely virtual world called *Second Life*. The towers, which had taken just a day to build, were the largest constructions *Second Life* had ever seen. When they fell, the world crashed. Every player was ejected.

Later, Jones and his friends logged back in to *Second Life*. By then, the collapse was complete. Standing among the rubble, James Au asked the friend who'd lost a relative in the first collapse how it had felt to be inside. "It was closure for me," he said. "I wanted to know just what he went through. How it would have felt for him. *Second Life* allows me to do that and live to tell the tale."

Until recently, in online worlds, 'player-grief' meant someone who threw grenades at his own team. But as virtual worlds become more complex, and their possibilities for interaction become more subtle, a new way of expressing grief has begun to take shape. The California-developed *Second Life*, where this phenomenon began, is perhaps the world's most morally complex virtual world. In *Second Life* there are no set goals, no guidelines at all about what is or is not possible. You can build what you like, be what you like, say what you like: as long as you don't offend other players. And that's where the problems really start.

In the rubble of the towers, a crowd began to form. Then the crowd began to argue. Some were fascinated by the spectacle. Others were furious at such insensitive re-enactment. Later, on the *Second Life* bulletin boards, the argument raged on. **Damiana Domino** called the project 'really tasteless' and argued that painful memories should be left out of *Second Life*. "It's unfortunate that in a place where no physical harm can come to us, we still find ways to hurt each other," wrote **Ananda Sandgrain**, a Manhattan resident in her first life. The event was tasteless, **David Cartier** thought, and Au's coverage was "sensationalist and exploitative".

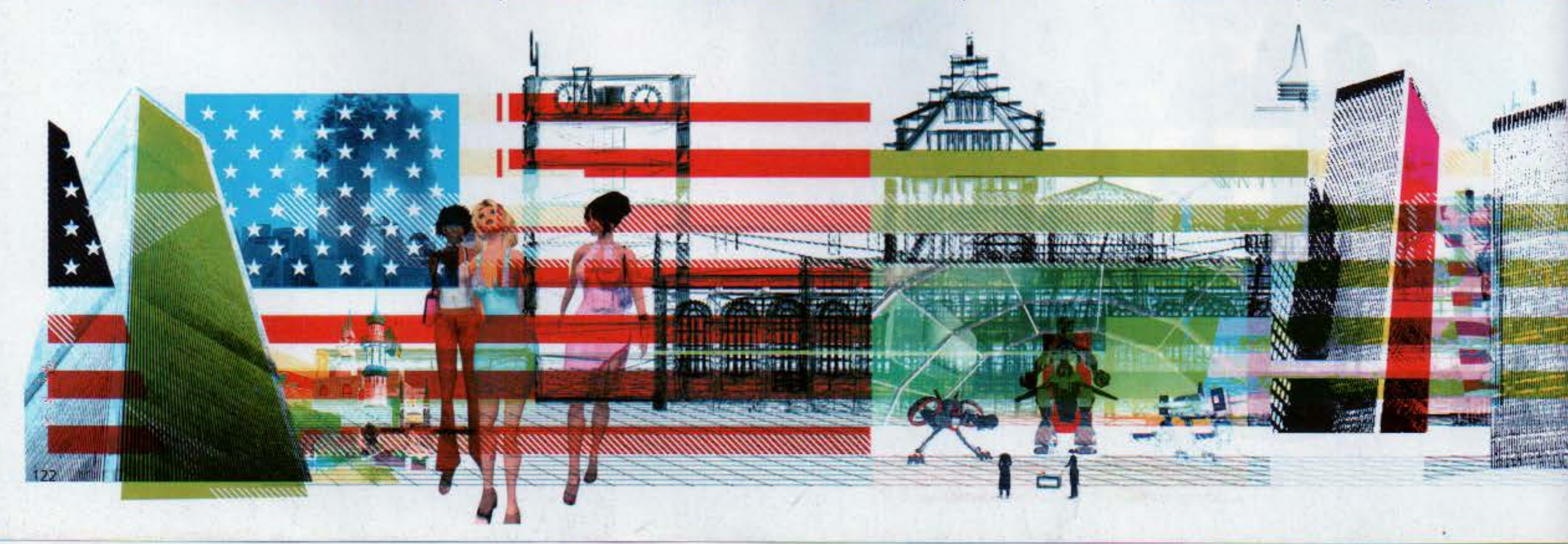
Others, however, disagreed. "If you didn't like what was going on then you could just go elsewhere," **RisingShadow** wrote. "We share a multi-cultural world of diverse ideas," added **Kohne Kato**. "For our own sanity, we must be tolerant." "This is just a game," said **Brad Lupis**. "Yet another one who just doesn't get it," **Grim Lupis** (no relation) replied. "This is just a game to you. To others, it's something completely different."

This year, *Second Life* residents constructed hundreds of September 11 memorials. Most avoided controversy: they built virtual memorial gardens, or virtual memorial plaques, or virtual memorial statues of NY firemen raising the American flag. But one resident, Sexy Casanova, bit the bullet and constructed a much more detailed replica of the World Trade Centre. Perhaps crucially for his popularity ratings, he didn't knock them down. Even so, many residents took a while to accept it. "At first I thought it was morbid," **Olympia Reebus** said about the World Trade Centre's third incarnation. "But now I realise it's a way to never forget."

No other form of expression seems to have this impact. Theatre lost its ability to shock back in the mid-'60s; Andres Serrano's Piss Christ angers only the fundamentalist or the naïve. But in virtual worlds, it seems, there is still everything to play for. Throughout millennia, mankind has dreamed alone. Now, suddenly, in our virtual worlds we are able to share and inhabit each other's dreams. But wherever human beings share things, fights break out, and our virtual worlds are no exception. In moments like the second World Trade Centre crash, what should be a virtual utopia descends into yet another struggle over right and wrong.

"I have a question," **Emericus Phaeton** writes, in the final September 11 comment on the *Second Life* bulletin board: "When does *Third Life* come out so we can escape our second one?"

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta



NOW IT'S 'SIEG HEIL THE HEDGEHOG'

Secret government papers released yesterday possibly reveal that Adolf Hitler was a videogame fan, and enjoyed regular sessions on a sick mass murder simulator

Adolf Hitler, the Nazi dictator of Germany between 1933 and 1945 who ordered the murder of millions, is said to be a big fan of the videogame *Lemmings* according to declassified Ministry of Defence documents.

Though an apparently innocent puzzle game, *Lemmings* literally teaches players to kill, cynically luring them in with bright colours and cute characters. While the game may seem harmless at first, players are able to wipe out dozens of the innocent on-screen Lemming characters at the press of a button, and revel in their plaintive death cries.

Eyewitnesses possibly quoted in the papers – which have been kept secret for 60 years, and which we haven't seen – claim that Hitler was seen playing the *Lemmings* game just hours before he signed the decree to invade Poland.

But it wasn't only *Lemmings* that fuelled his sick lust for death and destruction: during his final days, Hitler retired to a Berlin bunker with armfuls of games, including megalomania-inducer *Populous* and drug use-promoting, turtle-harm-producing kiddie favourite *Mario 64*.

Hitler's descent into insane, mono-testicled mass murder isn't an isolated incident. Similar symptoms are common among videogame fans, with as much as

It wasn't only Lemmings that fuelled his sick lust for death: Hitler retired to a Berlin bunker with armfuls of games

88 per cent of all deaths now attributed to videogame-related causes.

"It has long been common knowledge that these so-called games turn people into perverted maniacs," said videogame expert Professor Dubrey Belt.

History is littered with tragedies inspired by videogames. For instance, Attilla The Hun had an extensive videogame library, including twisted titles like *Sonic And Knuckles* and *Bak 2 Skool*. "I myself recently killed approximately four people with a hammer after I had a go on my son's copy of *Puyo Puyo*, and spent months fighting dirty impulses after I glimpsed a photograph of Sony's new PSP handheld," continued Professor Belt.

In a bid to stem the tide of game-related deaths, Professor Belt has established the Institute of Videogame Hysteria and Associated Disorders, a residential clinic for people whose lives have been ruined by videogames. "We have a broad range of patients, from a man who thinks *Pac-Man* comes to his bedroom window at nights, and limply bangs against it, to a girl who became addicted to *Silent Hill* and can't leave the house without taking an un-tuned radio with her. Incredibly, she thinks it'll start hissing at her whenever danger approaches. "Another patient spent four hours playing *Ico*, then kicked his wife in the

(Cont. page 194)



HISTORY'S MOST EVIL VIDEOGAME FANS

GHENGIS KHAN

According to some experts, the Mongol warlord was said to be the greatest *Eternal Champions* player in all of Ancient Asia. Unfortunately, Khan spent so much time on the Mega Drive beat 'em up that he was said to be terrible at most other games. When beaten on *Fighters Megamix* by his grandson Kubla, Ghengis flew into a terrible rage.

Four days later, western Xia was a bloody wasteland

JACK THE RIPPER

Though Jack The Ripper remains a mystery, the Victorian serial-killer left several clues as to his identity. The body of his first victim, Mary Ann Nichols, may have been covered with pages of a videogame magazine, whilst prostitute Annie Chapman was probably discovered with a joypad stuff[...] in her mouth.

DAVROS

Though only a fictional character, had Davros – Doctor Who's arch-nemesis – actually existed, it's likely he'd have taken his inspiration for his evil Dalek army from any number of videogames.

Examples incl[...] well-[...]

Institute of Videogame Hysteria and Associated Disorders: Patient Questionnaire

Name: Edward Shoe
Patient Number: 243/F

Q1. Which of the following reactions are you most likely to experience after playing *Metal Gear Solid*?
a) A sense of well-being and satisfaction.
b) Mild anxiety.
c) An urge to hide in a box and fondle your bottom, whilst thinking about stabbing any number of your old school teachers.

Q2. You have placed a pre-order for *Metroid Prime 2*. Unfortunately, when you arrive to collect the game you are told they are out of stock. Do you:
a) Ask to speak to the manager?
b) Roll around on the floor, thrashing yourself with a knotted rope, whilst screaming about the evil crow who lives in your head?
c) Very calmly pull out a garden rake, and use it to start smashing apart everything in the shop.

Q3. Which of these peripherals do you own?
a) A wireless joypad.
b) A lightgun.
[...] A dead sheep nailed to your PS2.

Q4. Who usually buys your games?
a) You.
b) Your parents.
c) The Dark God Maelevolence.

Q5. When you were young, which of[...] activities was your preferred pastim[...]
a) Playing videogames.
b) Torturing your friends' pets by [...] to dance on heated sheets of met[...]
c) Both of the above, in that orde[...]

Q6. Your friend beats you at H[...]
a) Congratulate him on his vic[...]
b) Run off crying.
c) Hold him down, and press [...] rag over his face until he sto[...]

TOP TEN ALL FORMATS – DECEMBE[...]

10	Hungry Horace Gets Audited/ZX Sp[...]
9	Pac-Mon 3D/ZX Spectrum
8	Dratsab Attack 3D/ZX Spectrum
7	Zola Budd Manager/Commodore 64
6	Jet Set Luna Solar Pac Patrol Hun[...]
5	Maria Whittaker's Nudeathlon 3D[...]
4	Auf Wiedersehen Pet 3D/Commod[...]
3	Flopsy Bunny's Big 3D Adventure[...]
2	Donkey Kang/Commodore 64
1	Magnum P.I./BBC Model B

TOP TEN ALL FORMATS – DECEMBER [...]

10 Super Hyper Street Fighter II: Mega Thrust Kick Face Edition – SNES
09 Epilepsius – Mega Drive
08 Subliminal Violence Inducer 4 – Mega Driv[...]
07 Extreme Badminton – Mega CD
06 Sonic Tea Party – Mega Drive
05 Galactic Chess Extreme – SNES
04 Bra Hunter CD – Mega CD
03 Ronald McDonald: Quest For The Salt – M[...]
02 Extreme Shove Ha'Penny '94 – SNES/Me[...]
01 Super Duper Street Fighter II: Ultra Thrus[...] Neck Edition – Mega Drive

TOP TEN ALL FORMATS – DE[...]

10	Pokémon: Pumice Grey – G[...]
9	Vietnam: Torch the Gooks [...]
8	Tony Hawk's Demographic[...] Gnarly Skateboarding 2 – [...]
7	RapeMaster – PS2
6	Pokémon: Faded Brown – [...]
5	FIFA 2005 – Multi
4	This Is A Football Game 20[...]
3	FIFA 2012 – Multi
2	Mavis Beacon Teaches Ty[...]
	Magnum P.I. – Multi

inbox



Issue 143



Oh, Edge. I'll forgive you because I love you. But now I can't look at you without thinking of the good old days when we didn't need to overdose on graphics and colours to have a good time. Just page after page of solidly written text was enough for us back then. I hope it's just the excitement of trying something new and that you'll settle down again soon.

But if we're going to make this relationship work, we need some ground rules:
1. Serif or sans? Decide, for god's sake (sans, please).
2. Bring back RedEye.
Paul Westerman
PS Love the new rating system.

But the new rating system is the same as the old one. Really. Isn't it?

In **E**143's interview with Reggie Fils-Aime I noted that he made references to Nintendo trying to recapture the 'prototypical 20-year-old' market, and protesting that DS would not just be for your younger brother. The purpose of this, presumably, was to counter the widespread perception of Sony's PSP as being a more grown-up machine than Nintendo's effort. This, though, raises the question of what we mean by gaming for grown-ups. If it is to be determined by average user age, then fine, I'm sure that the sleek and stylish PSP will indeed sell more to higher age groups than DS will – because of its high price point, for one thing. The main reason for this, though, will be the brightly coloured universes already apparent in the majority of the DS's software lineup. According to the criteria by which most other media are judged, these do indeed appear childish. However, the trouble is that, by other media's standards, so do the opposition's more 'mature' titles.

Aesthetically speaking, properties like *Devil May Cry* and *Grand Theft Auto* are actually just as childish as the Mushroom Kingdom, but in a different way – they are adolescent. To my mind, the word 'adult' in relation to games is often merely a synonym for 'high levels of violence', perhaps even with the odd ill-judged obscenity or faintly embarrassing sexual reference. In other media, 'adult' implies something that is complex, challenging and engaging, perhaps saying something interesting about the world. I can think of few videogames that really do this, other than by appropriating means of expression from other media in a fashion that is generally inept and jarring to the game itself – as in *Metal Gear Solid*'s dreadful cut-scenes.

This lack of true maturity by the standards of other media does not invalidate the games, of course, as they are not of those other media and, thus, shooting zombies in *Resident Evil* is, on its own terms, fun. It is not, however, inherently adult, even less so when you take the pathetic plot into account. Nor is it truly infantile – it is simply enjoyable in an age-neutral way, like having a game of football. The game works because it plays well, not necessarily because of the T-virus and the digitised blood. I agree with an old Mr Biffo column: other than as a basic motivation for an already-designed game mechanic, plot has little place in videogames outside of RPGs. Instead of pursuing abortive synergies with other media, it is my contention that videogames should give up on this arbitrary demarcation between the childish and the adult and realise that, in essence, there is no such thing as a 'mature' title, simply good games and bad games, whatever particular aesthetic drapery they choose to dress themselves up in or whatever weird input methods they may adopt. Or maybe I just want to justify to myself the fact that I really *really* want to play *Mr Driller* with a stylus.
Steven Tucker

Some healthy thinking. But there are other takes on Nintendo's manoeuvres...

Seeing a new piece of hardware trying to boost itself with a Super Mario 64 clone is outrageous. I wonder what the '64' element really implies

I wonder whether the fact that the NDS looks set to dominate the gaming industry purely on grounds of 'revolution' leaves any room for comment before we succumb to Nintendo's brainwashing and the patronising ideas of what gaming should be like from now on.

I may be but a humble gamer who grew up on Nintendo, occasionally brought to tears while playing *Zelda* games, but that shouldn't suggest that I might buy into whatever the Kyoto ex-giant sells me.

Sequels can be good; new input methods can be even better. However, seeing a new piece of hardware trying to boost itself with a *Super Mario 64* clone is downright outrageous. I wonder what the '64' element really implies. Is it 64bit gobbledygook, or is it actually the 64th sequel of a Mario title? And why do I have to be excited about the prospect of playing *Mario 64* DS this Christmas? Did I not play it to death five years ago? Why do I have to put up with Nintendo's nonsense about minigames and wi-fi connectivity? What's wi-fi?

For the past 15 years or so, all I have been asking for in return for my £40 visit to my local games store was a good game – not a minigame-enhanced sequel or *Pokémon* anachronisms



Is an update of *SM64* enough to make NDS desirable? Yiannis Alexious reckons not

redressing their lack of ideas with wi-fi cinema downloads.
Yiannis Alexiou

There are a number of ways of looking at this. On the one hand it's easy to demand that Nintendo produces, say, an entirely new 3D *Mario* title on DS because it's a new platform with new methodologies and it needs to make a splash, while on the other you could say that attempting to reproduce one of the truly best games of all time on a new handheld system would be just the thing to do in order to give it a much-needed dose of credibility. Neither is necessarily right; we'll see how *Mario* on NDS affects its sales very soon.

they would produce for me, their humble gamer. Now all I'm left with is two counts of disappointment – one of gladness and another of hope... but still no game. Ultimately, though, there are plenty more good racing titles either on their way or already out to buy, comparison to which *Juiced* now avoids. Or has that already happened?
Mark De Brito

Juiced was sent in to the **Edge** office clearly marked as a review copy before the unfortunate demise of Acclaim came to light. If a new version of the game appears next year, we will definitely re-review it. And good luck to the team with the refinements.

The knock-on effect of this growth is that the main marketplace, where development bucks can really be invested, is looking for established game styles

I was reading your review of *Juiced* in issue 142, and also reading about Juice Games' unfortunate state of flux with Acclaim going bankrupt, and that THQ has picked up the game instead. Thing is, THQ are committing only to a Summer 2005 release, willing to give the game more development time. I'm not suggesting that the game itself is going to be reinvented in this time, but let's hope they take your points – and of other reviews that got through before the delay – on board.

In light of this development, have you considered whether reviewing this year rather than next year is fair? And if so would **Edge** ever re-review a game given the correct conditions, or have you ever had to? It makes me wonder if Juice Games knowingly released beta review copies (following schedule, of course) to gain valuable review information, or even if **Edge** has ever reviewed games that never got released... because, somehow, both of these events happened. I can just imagine this being explained away five years later in Reset or a feature on premature/doomed reviews!

My concern for *Juiced* is not one of bias, just one of interest. By admission I do have a few friends who are working on the game, and for quite some time I've been quite interested to see what

Noticing that marketing has again become the whipping boy of Inbox, I thought I'd raise my head above the parapet and defend this noble discipline, because it's all too easy to point fingers when we see a market that is seemingly shorn of continued creative growth and freedoms.

The question is: would this market ever have got as big as it has without good marketing? I doubt it. It still would've been 'bedroom', which would have made some happy, but not those who also expect to tap into the benefits of success in the mainstream (we've all seen the fast cars and posh offices!).

The knock-on effect of this growth is that the main marketplace, where the development bucks can really be invested, is looking for established styles of games – sport sims, driving games, shooters, RPGs – and this is because there is enough potential for return on investment. New, groundbreaking, ideas will have to start off as small investments, to test the marketplace, because, like all games, they still have to be profitable.

I would echo **Edge**'s assertion that the best marketers really know their products and support this with the counterpoint: the best creatives understand who they are marketing to. Miyamoto, Suzuki and others really understand what turns on the gaming public – they create games for others, not themselves. There are too many creatives who create for themselves, or for their peers, or for awards.

Even the best creatives have had bad moments: Kubrick made Eyes Wide Shut. *Rez*, for all its strengths, was a failure. Even the article on *Ico 2* in **E142** was very revealing about how creatives learn the hard way about market mechanics – which they are aiming to get right this time. It's all about learning from experience.
John Braithwaite

May I congratulate you on being able to think outside the box yet again. Your awe-inspiring cosmetic makeover is by far and away the most fitting tribute to the most informative and knowledgeable magazine available. Everything about the new look is amazing, from the DS flap on the cover, to the new fonts, the better and more 'modern' cover, the layout and everything.

The Dominik Diamond interview and the exquisite *Majora's Mask* articles are two of the finest I've read all year. Also, what a way to start the format, with your fifth ten out of ten in 11 years – *Half-Life 2* looks worthy.

E143 was by a long way the most enjoyable issue since E128. Anyhow, let me say that I've long wanted to write in and proclaim my love. E143 convinced me to do this, and for that I humbly thank you.
Max Hough

We received lots of feedback concerning Edge's redesign, and appreciate it all.





Edge before and after its redesign: responsible for a mixed bag of reader letters

I read in **E142** the problems Microsoft are having with pirated copies of *Halo 2* circulating the web, and I have to say that Microsoft are partially to blame here (although I obviously don't condone piracy). Sony lost millions in pirated games for the original PlayStation and with the PS2 have taken a much stronger line: of the many PS2 owners I know, none have had these modded to allow pirated games, and none intend to. Yet of the Xbox owners I know one of the reasons they purchased the Xbox over the PS2 was the ease with which it could be modded, with Microsoft seemingly turning a blind eye to allow for a greater number of console sales to increase market share over their main competitor. Now with the amount of pirated Xbox games available and the impact it will undoubtedly have on their prime IP's sales this Christmas they suddenly seem to be on the offensive. Maybe it is time that all the major console developers get together and share ideas on how to beat piracy fully for the next platforms, or will Microsoft continue to turn a blind eye for Xbox 2 just to get a few more sales over the PS3?
Duncan Stewart

You're getting uncomfortably close to conspiracy-theory territory. Be sure of this: with PS3 and XB2, anti-piracy measures will be seriously serious.

After reading Ben Tipple's letter on game ratings (inbox, **E143**) and his observations of parents' ignorance of the content of adult games, *GTA* being his example, I couldn't help but

Continued

feel he was exhibiting ignorance on the subject himself. Ben stated that '*GTA* is filled with prostitution, violence, rape, drugs and bad language' and says that he expresses these concerns for parents that take a copy of *GTA* to his counter. But having played through both of the *GTA*s that would have been out at his time of sending that letter and his experience at a game store, I can confirm that, far from *GTA* being filled with all these nasty things, it has barely a trace of bad language, absolutely nothing to do with rape, prostitution plays no role in the actual story itself, and where it is minutely present it plays out much more tame than anything you would see in a Carry On film. Drugs also are never promoted, or taken, by the protagonist of the *GTA* series (the only drug scene I can think of in either game was when Rosenberg took a line of coke, which I actually thought was him playing with toy planes). No, *GTA* isn't filled with any of these things, except violence, but is in fact filled with driving and cut-scenes to link the vehicular missions.

But where could Ben have gotten the opinion that *GTA* (being the best example, being the most adult game out) was just filled with rape, bad language, prostitution and such? Why, the tabloids, of course! These papers spread fear and shame in games by giving them images, with headlines like 'Ban these evil games', stories of murders being blamed (by lawyers) on games like *GTA*, so people begin to think that these games are filled with these things. But here lies the problem. Tabloids spread this disinformation like a virus, and if people believe that games are already filled with drugs, violence, prostitution, etc, then the game makers wouldn't exactly shock anyone if they actually made a game with these nasties in it. On the contrary, people would expect future titles to have such things in them – maybe even want them to in some cases. In effect the tabloids are paving the way towards games that will not shock people or cause as much concern without their input, and are even creating a demand for them with all their free advertising.

At the time of writing this I haven't yet played the new *GTA*, but with the tabloids' help I wouldn't be surprised if Rockstar felt they could get away with drugs, bad language and the works. If they have already got the gamers who work in game shops thinking all these things about games, what hope does an ignorant parent have of knowing the truth? As far as they know, games have been full of that stuff for years.

Danny Keaton

So Edge has finally turned into just another videogame magazine. I'm talking, of course, about your redesign. I've never, in all my years buying videogame magazines (and I've been buying them since 1994), been so shocked and appalled.

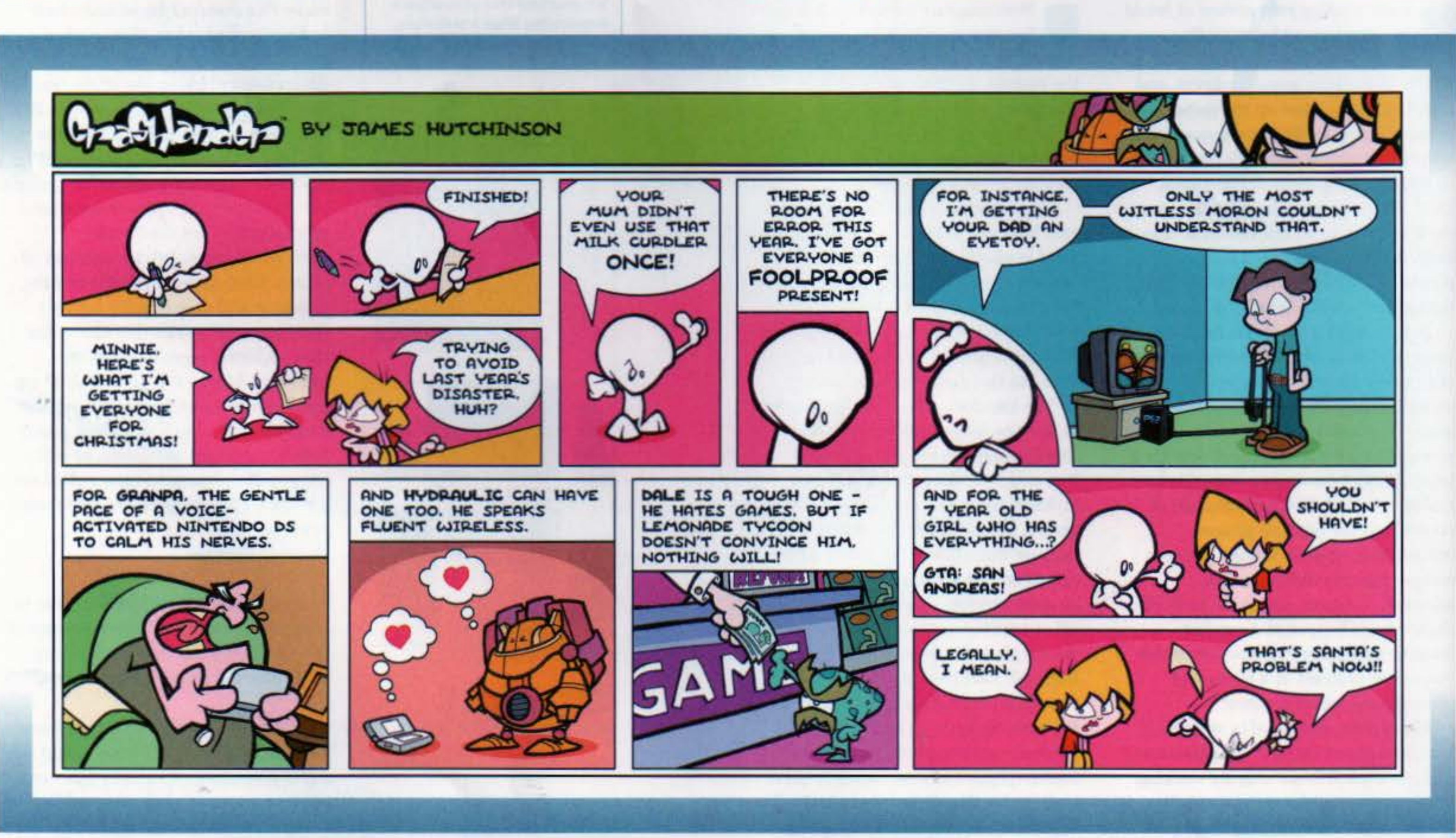
I hope you're proud of yourselves, because you've turned our magazine from a thing of beauty I was proud to put on display on my coffee table into a rag that I wouldn't even have in my bathroom. Do you think your readers are all ten years old?

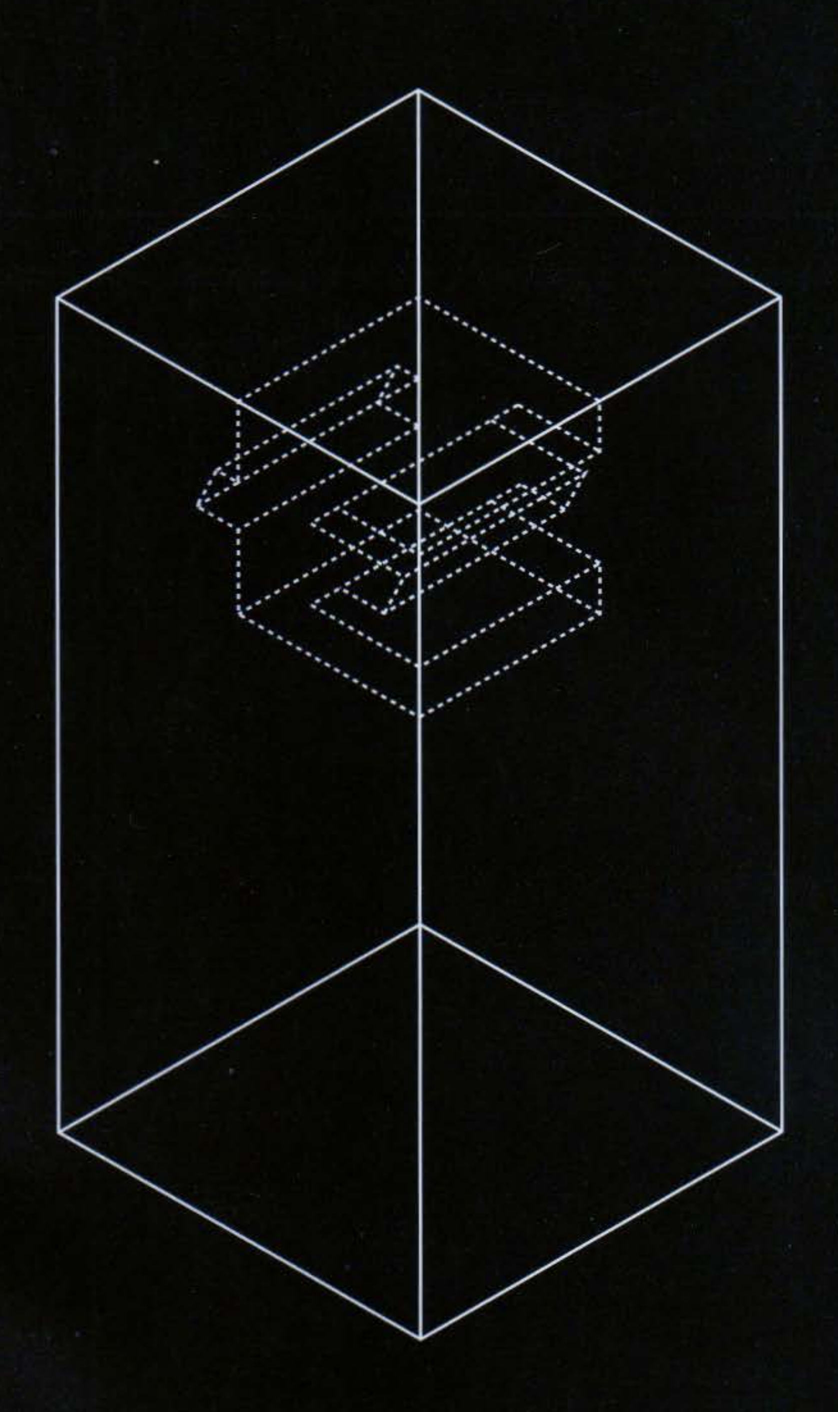
I thought you should know that I won't be buying the magazine again unless you change it back to its former glorious self. NOW.

Richard Holden

Again: thanks for all your letters regarding the redesign.

Send us email **(edge@futurenet.co.uk)**, but be sure to use 'Inbox' as the subject line. Or send a letter to this address: Inbox, **Edge**, Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW





Next month

Edge 145
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PATHWAY TO GLORY
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HALO 2
METROID PRIME 2: ECHOES
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